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Sinclair Lewis : leader of the conflict with conformity in three novels (Main Street, Babbitt, and Arrowsmith) 1920-1925

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SINCLAIR LEWIS: LEADER OF THE CONFLICT WITH CONFORMITY IN THREE NOVELS (MAIN STREET, BABBITT, AND ARROWSMITH) 1920-1925

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NOVELS BY SINCLAIR LEWIS

1912 - Hike and the Aeroplane

1914 - Our Mr. Wrenn

1915 - The Trail of the Hawk

1917 - The Job

1917 - The Innocents

1919 - Free Air

1920 - Main Street

1922 - Babbitt

1925 - Arrowsmith

1926 - Mantrap

1927 - Elmer Gantry

1928 - The Man Who Knew Coolidge

1929 - Dodsworth

1933 - Ann Vickers

1934 - Work of Art

1935 - It Can't Happen Here

1938 - The Prodigal Parents

1940 - Bethel Merriday

1943 - Gideon Planish

1945 - Cass Timberlane

1947 - Kingsblood Royal

1949 - The God-Seeker

1951 - World So Wide

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to analyze and discuss the conflict with conformity in three novels of Sinclair Lewis from 1920 to 1925. It is also the intention of this paper to identify Sinclair Lewis as the leader of the conflict - with - conformity movement of this period.

Mark Schorer noted this when he said:

> He /Lewis/ . . . became . . . the spokesman for a literary generation and the year 1920 is in this sense historic. American culture seems always to have had a literary spokesman, a single writer who presented American culture and who presented American attitudes toward that culture to the world. The last of these had been William Dean Howells, who died in the spring of 1920, ancient and honored. With the publication of his acid-etched but enormously popular portrait of the American small town /Main Street/, Sinclair Lewis emerged as the spokesman for a new literary generation.[1]

Sheldon Grebstein supported this position Lewis had attained when he added:

> A brutal war and an inconclusive peace had turned the younger generation against their elders and everything they represented. Thus, Main Street and the mood of the time made Sinclair Lewis the voice for which the young rebels had been listening. America's intellectuals and a good part of its thinking citizenry had become introspective, self-conscious, and self-critical; Lewis caught the wave at its crest.[2]

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[1]Mark Schorer, "Main Street," American Heritage, 12:28-31, October, 1961.

[2]Sheldon Grebstein, Sinclair Lewis (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1962), p. 72.

Other writers had preceded Lewis in attacking the small town, its conformities and conventions. Edgar Lee Masters and Sherwood Anderson had criticized the insularity of the American village. But none so devastatingly as Lewis.

Sheldon Grebstein supports this fact when he observed:

> Dreiser's grimness had repelled the mass audience, Anderson was too fumbling and arty, and Mencken's influence was limited largely to the readers of the 'Smart Set;' but Lewis broke through layers of public indifference and the hostility toward unpleasant novels.[3]

And Mark Schorer noted further:

> Main Street was certainly the fullest indictment that had been delivered, the least compromising and the noisiest, a thunderclap that changed the literary atmosphere. In that very year, Mencken's essay 'The National Letters', had seen no escape from the 'conformity,' 'timorousness,' and 'lack of enterprise and audacity' that he believed to be the enemies of great litterateurs. But with Main Street . . . he was to discover the beginning of a decade of literary revolt that would challenge every accepted value. Beginning with Lewis's assault on the provincialism of backwoods America, the attack would come to include everything that Mencken denounced -- 'fundamentalism in religion, capitalism in industry, commercialism in education, science, and the arts, chauvinism in international affairs, reactionism in public opinion at large.'[4]

It is not because Main Street, Babbitt, and Arrowsmith are generally conceded to be the most popular of Lewis's novels that they have been chosen for this study. Rather, it is because the three protagonists in these novels exemplify, more

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[3]Ibid., p. 73.

[4]Schorer, op. cit., p. 75.

succinctly than characters elsewhere in the works of Lewis, conflict with the conformity to their environments.

Carol Kennicott, George Babbitt, and Martin Arrowsmith are tragic figures whose heroic ideals are subordinated in an age of increasing commercial progress. They are aware of the materialistic society and its smothering effect upon them, but in their gropings to adjust to their surroundings they are often overwhelmed by forces beyond their control.

Carol Kennicott, impatient to reform Gopher Prairie, bristles with reform and tries to bring culture, enlightenment and beauty to Main Street. But the people are obdurated against any progressive ideas. Carol's rather ridiculous attempt to convert the village to a quaint, colonial replica of an eastern hamlet is an impossible dream.

The people lobby against taxes to promote civic welfare, they gossip (often viciously), they are smug and intolerant, and they are satisfied with their standardization. Their resistance to Carol's efforts causes her to moan despairingly:

> It is an unimaginatively standardized background, a sluggishness of speech and manners, a rigid ruling of the spirit by the desire to appear respectable. It is contentment . . . the contentment of the quiet dead, who are scornful of the living for their restless walking. It is negation canonized as the one positive virtue. It is the prohibition of happiness. It is slavery self-taught and self-defended. It is dullness made God. A savorless people, gulping tasteless food, and sitting afterward, coatless and thoughtless, in rocking chairs prickly with inane decorations, listening to mechanical music, saying mechanical things about the excellence of Ford

> automobiles, and viewing themselves as the greatest race in the world.[5]

In this struggle, Carol is beaten, but not decisively. Sheldon Grebstein reminds us that "she is still a rebel though now somewhat tamed, and her attitude lets us continue to like and respect her because she has not sold out. . . ."[6]

Where Main Street derided the conformity and complacency of the town, Babbitt ridicules the same frailties of the city. The citizens of Zenith worship granite skyscrapers, automobiles, tiled bathrooms, and booster clubs. All this uniformity and standardization Babbitt revels in, along with his shrewd real estate ventures.

In the later part of the book, however, Babbitt challenges the code he is slave to, but he is routed and subdued by the cabal of conformity. Uneasy but unable to fulfill his own feelings of self realization, Babbitt nevertheless does urge his son to reject conformity and seek his own independence.

In Arrowsmith we find the same conflicts with the conventions of society and subsequent defeats suffered by this young doctor in his quest for truth. Grebstein, however, stresses these facts concerning Arrowsmith:

> . . . but in each case he surmounts the defeat by growing, by learning from his mistakes. In each of these encounters and defeats he leaves society a

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[5]Sinclair Lewis, Main Street (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1921), p. 265.

[6]Sheldon Grebstein, Sinclair Lewis (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1962), p. 70.

> little further behind, until, finally, he abandons it completely.[7]

Therefore, it is possible to trace an evolution in the dilemmas of our three central characters' revolts. Carol Kennicott, perhaps, puts up the most valiant yet futile fight in her struggle to find self-expression and self-attainment. George Babbitt allows himself to look inward and assert a moment of rebellion, but he is too gregarious to prolong his individualism. In Martin Arrowsmith, however, there is an achievement of victory after a morally significant struggle.

While Lewis was unquestionably the leader and conscience of his generation he was influenced to some degree by certain of his contemporaries such as James Branch Cabell, Edith Wharton, H. G. Wells, and H. L. Mencken, among others. In addition Sheldon Grebstein reminds us:

> Like Emerson and Thoreau, Lewis hated conformity, materialsm, hypocrisy, and pretentiousness. . . . Like them he loved man more than he did men. Lewis's utterances, which caused the same stir in his audience as did Emerson's, even attacked the same s sacred cows: 'behavior, traditional religion, the worship of the golden calf.' . . .[8]

In the introductory chapter of this paper, an attempt has been made to explain briefly the title and significance of this thesis.

Chapter II contains the biography and early influences

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[7]Grebstein, op. cit., p. 87.

[8]Ibid., p. 31.

of Sinclair Lewis which are always necessary prerequisites to the appreciation and understanding of any author's works.

Chapters III, IV, and V are devoted to the development of the problem of conflict and conformity confronting Carol, Babbitt and Arrowsmith.

Chapter VI discusses the influence of his contemporaries on Sinclair Lewis, and his influence, in turn, upon them.

The concluding chapter cites the significance and achievement of Sinclair Lewis in American literature.

BIOGRAPHY AND EARLY INFLUENCES

When Sinclair Lewis, the brilliant satirist and nomadic novelist, died in Rome in 1951 at the age of sixty-six, his remains were returned to Minnesota, scene of much of his social satire. Shortly thereafter, Lewis's former wife, Grace Hegger Lewis, offered this touching yet truthful eulogy:

> Dear, dear Minnesota Tumbleweed, driven by the winds of your own blowing, rootless to the day when your ashes were returned to the soil which had never received your living roots, I offer you these memories. . . .[1]

Her reminiscences, and those of others, reveal Lewis to have been a restless and compulsive writer. Three of his most famous novels, Main Street, Babbitt, and Arrowsmith, were written abroad, yet all three are so typically American in setting that one marvels how Lewis could have captured the local scene so completely while so far removed.

Lewis explained the enigma in this fashion:

> I have traveled much . . . in forty states of the United States, in Canada, Mexico, England, Scotland, France, Italy . . . the fact is that my foreign traveling has been a quite uninspired recreation, a flight from reality. My real traveling has been sitting in Pullman smoking cars, in a Minnesota village, on a Vermont farm, in a hotel in Kansas City or Savannah, listening to the normal daily drone of what are to me the most fascinating and exotic people in the world -- the average citizens

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[1]Grace Hegger Lewis, With Love From Gracie (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955), p. 335.

> of the United States, with their friendliness to strangers and their rough teasing, their passion for material advancement and their shy idealism, their interest in all the world and their boastful provincialism -- the intricate complexities which an American novelist is privileged to portray.[2]

Of his earlier background, Lewis had this to say:

> I was born . . . February 7, 1885, in a Minnesota village, Sauk Centre, a genuine prairie town, ringed round with wheat fields broken by slew and oak rimmed lakes, with the autumn flight of ducks from Canada as its most exotic feature. My boyhood was alarmingly normal, midwestern, American -- my father the prosperous pioneer doctor whose diversions were hunting and travel; my school the public school, with no peculiarly inspired teachers; my sports aside from huge amounts of totally unsystematized reading of everything from dime novels and new books and casual sentimental novels to translations of Homer, were the typical occupations of such a boy: swimming in the creek, hunting rabbits . . . there was not much work -- a few evening chores, of the woodbox filling sort.
>
> I don't know how I got the inspiration to go East and become irregular, abnormal, happy, and otherwise literary.[3]

Years later, however, Grace Hegger Lewis remembered that at a big political party and gathering in Minnesota, Sinclair Lewis paid particular and affectionate attention to his former sixth-grade teacher, Mrs. Frank S. Parker. When he had announced to her as a small boy that he wanted to become a famous writer, she had answered seriously, "Well, why not?"[4]

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[2]Harry Maule and Melville Cane, editors, The Man From Main Street, A Sinclair Lewis Reader (New York: Random House, 1953), p. 55.

[3]Charles Baldwin, The Men Who Make Our Novels (New York: Dodd Mead and Company, 1928), pp. 323-4.

[4]Lewis, Grace Hegger, op. cit., p. 298.

Although his father would have preferred that Lewis attend a smaller, less expensive, Middle-Western college, Lewis chose Yale. Whether Lewis felt Yale had more to offer, or whether he had an innate desire to return to the Housatonic region where generations of his forebearers had dwelt, Lewis arrived at New Haven in 1903.

A colleague, Leonard Bacon gave these impressions of Sinclair Lewis, the Yale man:

> Harry was a scarlet thread in the drab of my freshman year . . . the cadaverous, pale, freckled face and tomato soup colored hair of that singular junior, who was to be the first American to win the Nobel Prize for literature, could not be ignored any more than now. 'Harry' Lewis was as different from the correct young types around him as Sauk Centre is from Tuxedo. He had none of their artificial constraints and far more real dignity of nature. He stormed and he damned, but again he might roust you as gently as a suckling dove. . . .[5]

It was this intolerance of petty conformity and a genuine desire to help and soothe others that marked a characteristic compassion in Lewis's personal life and his novels.

Lewis was not entirely happy at Yale. In fact he was quite disappointed. The suave, sophisticated young men at the University, for the most part, were cool or snubbed him. They ridiculed his appearance, mannerisms, and uncouth western

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[5]Leonard Bacon, "Yale '09," Saturday Review of Literature, 19:13-4, February 4, 1939.

ways. He, in turn, was bored by campus social life and athletics. Only the friendship of a few kindred students and professors prevented Lewis from resigning and returning home.

Knowing this period of Lewis's life, one can see the reflection, understand the tenderness and sadness in the magnificent short story, Young Man Axelbrod. Reminiscing further, Bacon tells us:

> . . . he lives in a cheap room in a boarding house outside the pale of the University where I perused a typed volume of his poetry four inches thick . . . Poetry was his love, and I am still astonished at the direction in which his fate took him. It was clear even then that he was a 'comer,' but in 1905 I should have predicted for him the lyric, perhaps the epic, but not the photographic . . . I discussed with him the merits of an equally fat book by an author who never won the Nobel Prize. The unfortunate's name was Swinburne, to us at the time a figure who meant liberty and the casting off of fetters.[6]

Suddenly Lewis shook off a few restrictions himself. Leaving Yale in his junior year, he experimented with socialism:

> He looked for an intenser, richer life at Helicon Hall in New Jersey as Hawthorne had looked for it in an earlier communistic experiment at Brook Farm and found himself as dissatisfied as Hawthorne.[7]

Lewis's stay at Upton Sinclair's 'Utopia' lasted about a month. Once, after a frustrating day as furnace man, he

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[6]Ibid., p. 14.

[7]Maule and Cane, op. cit., p. 61.

wrote a short verse satirizing his socialistic experience. He particularly slanted it at a certain Professor Noyes and his wife, who enjoyed supervisory positions.

> Each genius to his menial task
> To honored labor, and at eve
> To sit and dream as girls and boys
> Except, that is,
> The bloodless ones called Noyes![8]

Returning to Yale, Lewis found it pleasant to be among classmates instead of the masses, but the tag of socialism was to be associated with him and his novels by some critics for many years.

Before he graduated from Yale in 1908, Lewis made two cattle boat trips to Europe, having barely enough money to keep himself alive before he returned. Later he went down to Panama in a futile quest for a job on a railroad, managing to return home only as a stowaway.

This restless, adventurous, and curious spirit which was to typify his life: "to seek, to know, to feel," gave Lewis the insight he projected so convincingly in his characters.

As an Ivy League graduate, Lewis found his illustrious alma mater no open sesame to immediate fame and fortune. Newspaper reporting, hack writing, and editorial assignments groomed him for eventual success, but not before he had known failure and a certain amount of poverty. But Lewis had faith

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[8] Ibid.

in himself. He was convinced that some day he would write the "great American novel," and the "germ" of this project was already gestating in his mind, appropriately or inappropriately tagged as The Village Virus, later to be known as Main Street.

Meanwhile Lewis was busy writing short stories in between editorial assignments. His first book, a boy's adventure story, was Hike and the Aeroplane, published under the pseudonym of Tom Graham. His first novel was Our Mr. Wrenn signed by "Sinclair Lewis" and published by Harper Brothers in 1914.[9]

On page three of Our Mr. Wrenn, one can read the promise of Lewis's crisp and devastating descriptive style so evident in his later works:

> Mrs. Zapp was a fat landlady. When she sat down there was usually a straight line from her chin to her knees. She was sitting down. When she moved she groaned, and her apparel creaked. She groaned and creaked from bed to breakfast, and ate five griddle cakes, two helpings of scrapple, an egg, some rump steak, and three cups of coffee, slowly and resentfully. She creaked and groaned from breakfast to her rocking chair, and sat about wondering why Providence had inflicted upon her a weak digestion. . . .[10]

The Trail of the Hawk was published the following year. Next came The Job. Charles Baldwin says of it:

The Job made something of a stir. I remember

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[9]Ibid., p. 198.

[10]Baldwin, op. cit., p. 324.

> myself, in 1918, announcing that Mr. Lewis had arrived. But really he hadn't. He was there, the essential Lewis, in all three of those books. But we didn't know it.[11]

That essential something was the conformity and conformity and conflict theme, the pacemaker for the pattern of Lewis's most successful novels of the post-war decade. Our Mr. Wrenn tells how an insignificant office worker quits his job and goes abroad to find adventure and intrigue with a young and beautiful art student. For a while he revels in his bohemian way of life. But when his lover tires of him, Mr. Wrenn returns to his former conventional mode of living, sadder but wiser for his fling.

In The Job, there is Una Golden's revolt against the drudgery and drabness of the business world.

The Job is realistic in tone and detail but the heroine is able to resolve the problems of career and romance compatibly.

For the most part, however, people in Lewis's most successful novels are those who were failures -- failures in adjusting to their new environments from which they cannot escape and to which they inevitably conform.

Editors Maule and Cane emphasized Lewis's obsession even at this time to be a critical realist:

> . . . there was at the time he was first

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[11] Ibid., p. 321.

> breaking into print a sort of general agreement among his detractors as well as his friends that Hal Lewis was something special, was headed for greater things. We couldn't have put it into words then, but we all felt it about him as we did not feel about most of the others in the group.[12]

Meanwhile, Lewis had married Grace Livingstone Hegger and had set up house-keeping on Long Island.

Marriage, however, did not cause any slackening in his literary output. The Saturday Evening Post was buying many of his short stories, and despite his exacting job as editor for a publishing firm, he was writing his novels on commuter trains and beside the kitchen sink. Lewis recalled this when he answered his fans who bemoaned their lack of time to write:

> In the evening, after dinner and playing and loafing and perhaps reading a manuscript not finished in office hours, I would usually capture another hour or two. Oh I didn't want to work. I was tired. I longed to go to bed. But I didn't let myself do it till midnight.[13]

But Lewis was as confident as he was resolute. The well-known account by Mencken bears this out.

> Mencken tells . . . of Lewis coming in to interrupt a pleasant evening he and Nathan were spending together. Lewis drank their good liquor and talked interminably of the great novel he had written. Neither of them believed him. They pooh-poohed the idea that anything great could come out of Lewis. And then they read Main Street; and, by God, it was great![14]

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[12]Maul and Cane, op. cit., p. 75.

[13]Ibid., p. 204.

[14]Baldwin, op. cit., p. 322.

In a letter to Alfred Harcourt, of Harcourt, Brace and Company, dated 1920, Lewis revealed remarkable confidence in and foresight concerning his forthcoming novel, Main Street:

> I believe that it will be the beginning of my writing. No book and no number of short stories I've ever done have ever meant a quarter of what this means to me. I'm working on it twenty-four hours a day -- whether I'm writing or playing.[15]

Years of writing and editing had given Lewis a fine sense of self evaluation. In the decade to follow he was seldom to be wrong. After six previously published books of moderate success, he hoped to make enough money to allow him to continue writing without resorting to ther work. Never did Lewis believe nor hope that this one book like Byron would "allow him to wake and find himself famous." But at thirty-five the one book that he felt he had to write containing his scorn, rage, and rebellion, accumulated through all his youth and middle years was finished.[16] Main Street became a new avenue in Lewis's life that led directly to fame and success!

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[15]Harrison Smith, editor, From Main Street to Stockholm: Letters of Sinclair Lewis (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), p. 25.

[16]Baldwin, op. cit., p. 328.

MAIN STREET

The publication of Main Street in 1920 established Sinclair Lewis's position in twentieth-century American literature as the supreme iconoclast of petty American provincialism. How he succeeded is explained by Lewis himself when he read his Nobel Prize address, "The American Fear of Literature:"

> I had realized in reading Balzac and Dickens that it was possible to describe French and English common people as one actually saw them. But it had never occurred to me that one might without indecency write of the people of Sauk Centre, Minnesota, as one felt about them. Our fictional tradition, you see, was that all of us in Midwestern villages were altogether noble and happy; that not one of us would exchange the neighborly bliss of living on Main Street for the heathen gaudiness of New York or Paris or Stockholm. But in Mr. Garland's Main Travelled Roads I discovered that there was one man who believed that Midwestern peasants were sometimes bewildered and hungry and vile -- and heroic. And, given this vision, I was released; I could write of life as living life.[1]

In his preface to Main Street Lewis explicitly explained that his tale was neither restrictive nor local color.

> . . . Main Street is the continuation of Main Streets everywhere. The story would be the same . . . in Kansas or Kentucky or Illinois . . . Main Street is the climax of civilization . . . That this Ford car might stand in front

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[1]Harry Maule and Melville Cane, editors, The Man From Main Street, A Sinclair Lewis Reader (New York: Random House, 1952), p. 16.

> of the Bon Ton store . . . Hannibal invaded Rome and Erasmus wrote in Oxford cloisters . . .![2]

Main Street was a run-away best-seller. Lewis had hoped for a sale of fifteen thousand copies, but the book went over the million mark and has become one of the all-time best sellers. People read and discovered that the conflicts and conformities facing Carol were sympathetic pains they also experienced but couldn't always cure in this "best of all possible worlds."

James Branch Cabell, admired by Lewis, wrote:

> I am very proud that this book should have my name upon the dedication page . . . you have done an eminently solid and fine thing, you have gone miles beyond the Lewis of yesterday.[3]

And Joseph Hergesheimer, to whom Main Street was also dedicated, wrote:

> This is a courageous, a lovely, and quite heartbreaking book. The detail and labor are stupendous and the felicity open to no question.[4]

John Galsworthy was particularly adulatory:

> Forgive this stranger for setting down a few words of enthusiastic appreciation of Main Street. I think your book may well start a national mood toward Main Street -- and the odd places of national life. You have used the

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[2]Sinclair Lewis, Main Street (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1920), preface.

[3]Grace Hegger Lewis, With Love From Gracie (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955), p. 156.

[4]Loc. cit.

> exhaustive method, I think, with absolute fittingness to your theme . . . every country, of course, has its Main Streets, all richly deserving diagnosis, but America is lucky to have found in you so poignant and just and stimulating a diagnostician.[5]

Main Street is the story of one girl's struggle against inertia and complacency in a small town. Valiantly, Carol Kennicott tries to brighten the grayness of Main Street, to awaken civic pride, and to attain culture for Gopher Prairie, but all of her reform programs die witheringly. After seven or eight years she flees to the excitement of Washington, D.C., but somehow the village virus has infected her, and she returns home to her husband, still rebellious, but more resigned.

> I've never excused my failures by sneering at my aspirations, by pretending to have gone beyond them. I do not admit that Main Street is as beautiful as it should be! I do not admit that Gopher Prairie is greater or more generous than Europe! I do not admit that dish washing is enough to satisfy all women! I may not have fought the good fight, but I have kept the faith.[6]

Actually, Carol's conflict with Main Street was destined even before she saw its bleakness. In the college sociological class, overcome with zeal for reform, she itched:

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[5]Grace Hegger Lewis, op. cit., p. 157.

[6]Sinclair Lewis, op. cit., p. 451.

> . . . to get my hands on one of those prairie towns and make it beautiful. . . . Nobody has done anything with the ugly towns here in the Northwest except hold revivals and build libraries to contain the Elsie books. I'll make 'em put in a village green and darling cottages, and a quaint Main Street![7]

Carol, the idealist, the visionary, the reformist, was never again to feel the exhilaration, the thrill of emancipation as the day she stole a few moments from her college classes and stood on a hill by the Mississippi:

> A breeze which had crossed a thousand miles of wheatland bellied her taffeta skirt in a line so graceful, so full of animation and moving beauty, that the heart of a chance watcher on the road tightened to wistfulness over her quality of suspended freedom. She lifted her arms, she leaned back against the wind, her skirt dipped and flared, a lock blew wild, a girl on a hilltop, credulous, plastic, young; drinking the air as she longed to drink life.[8]

Three years after graduation, Carol was to meet Dr. Will Kennicott, who was to woo, win, and take Carol to Main Street. Dr. Kennicott, almost McTeague-like, masterful, awkward yet deft, naive yet worldly, patient, and understanding, took Carol away from the steel stacks, rubber stamp, and smeared cards of the St. Paul library to Gopher Prairie.

On the train as Carol approached her new home, the thrill and joy of her recent honeymoon were replaced by a

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[7]Ibid., p. 61.

[8]Ibid., p. 1.

feeling of apprehension. Looking out of the coach window at the width and bigness of the prairie, broken only by the ugly, insignificant little towns, she speculated:

> What is its future . . . a future of cities and factory smut where now are loping empty fields? Homes universal and secure? Or placid chateaux ringed with sullen huts? Youth free to find knowledge and laughter? Willingness to shift the sanctified lies . . . The ancient stale inequalities, or something different in history, unlike the tedious maturity of other empires? What future and what hope? Carol's head ached with the riddle.[9]

But the terrible reality of Main Street was a shock which filled Carol with despair:

> Main Street with its two story brick shops, its story and a half wooden residences, its muddy expanse from concrete walk to walk, its huddle of Fords and lumber wagons was too small to absorb her. The broad, straight, unenticing gashes of the streets let in the grasping prairie on every side. She realized the vastness and emptiness of the land.[10]

Resolutely, Carol took a second appraisal:

> In all the town not one building save the Ionic bank which gave pleasure to Carol's eyes, not a dozen buildings which suggested that, in the fifty years of Gopher Prairie's existence, the citizens had realized that it was either desirable or possible to make this, their common home, amusing or attractive.[11]

It so happened that Bea Sorenson, Carol's future maid and a recent arrival from the "country," was viewing

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[9] Ibid., p. 25.

[10] Ibid., p. 33.

[11] Ibid., p. 37.

Main Street at the same time as Carol, but with a different perspective. To the stalwart Swedish girl, Gopher Prairie was a grand metropolis, and she particularly admired the elegant young lady passing by who almost seemed to be looking over the town, too.[12]

One of the earliest conflicts that Carol had to fight in her domestic life with Kennicott was the embarrassment of asking for money as she needed it for current expenses. She soon discovered she was not an isolated case. Other women in Gopher Prairie suffered the same indignity, but Carol was resolute as she faced Kennicott:

> I now humbly beg you to give me the money with which to buy meals for you to eat and hereafter remember it. The next time I shan't beg. I shall simply starve. Do you understand? I can't go on being a slave. . . .[13]

He pressed fifty dollars upon her, and after that he remembered to give her money regularly -- sometimes. Carol had, however, won her first moral victory in partially overcoming the patriarchial purse-string code of Gopher Prairie husbands.

Carol's next reform venture was definitely social -- a housewarming affair. She made careful and assiduous preparations, instructed her maid, Bea Sorenson, in proper

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[12] Ibid., p. 39.

[13] Ibid., p. 73.

department, and even sent to Saint Paul for favors and paper costumes, vowing: "I'll make 'em lively if nothing else. I'll make 'em stop regarding parties as committee meetings."[14] She dared to be different, unique -- and hoped her party would be a success. Carefully, she steered her guests from attempting their boring stereotyped stunts and specialties. She introduced new games, rollicking and uninhibited, but in good clean taste. Willfully, she kept the party humming despite a tendency for lassitude. With animation and bright chatter she strove to keep the party from stagnating into dull little circles. And finally, after bustling her guests into mandarin costumes, she appeared before them herself, shocking, delightful, and exotic in her "Princess Winky Poo" raiment ruling her court.

Everyone declared it was the best party the town had ever seen. "The week after, the Chet Dashaways gave a party. The circle of mourners kept its place all evening, and Dave Dyer did the 'stunt' of the Norwegian and the hen."[15]

The same weary round of socializing continued, unaffected by Carol's charming little housewarming.

Disappointed but undaunted, Carol tried to organize winter sports. She was successful in arranging a skating party, and she even nagged the group into making a

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[14] Ibid., p. 79.

[15] Ibid., p. 80.

bobsled run.

> They scooted down a long hill on a bob-sled, they upset and got snow down their necks, they shrieked that they would do it again, immediately -- and they did not do it again at all.[16]

She received the same response from a ski party she had hastily organized.

> They shouted and threw snowballs, and informed her that it was such fun . . . and they jollily returned home and never thereafter left their manuals of bridge.[17]

Once, in a spirit of exuberance on a cold tingling night, Carol romped down the street and jumped a curb with a war whoop. But figures behind curtains had seen and looked disapprovingly. "She never again felt quite young enough and defiant enough and free enough to run and halloo in the public streets . . ."[18]

In the drawing room, of the "Jolly Seventeen" club, Carol was experiencing rebukes of another kind for her "new ideas," and especially for her defense of the underpaid and unappreciated Swedish domestics and workers. Most of the club members were young married women whose husbands were associate members. Lewis noted "their rebuffs made her haughty; her haughtiness irritated them to franker rebuffs . . . 'and these women are to be my arbiters the rest of my life!' she wailed."[19]

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[16] Ibid., p. 83.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid., p. 86.

[19] Ibid., p. 92.

But through it all Will Kennicott was her "Rock of Ages" in a storm of meanness that was driving her mad, Lewis observes, yet she wondered if she had made a horrible mistake in marrying him.[20]

There were three other men in Gopher Prairie who were to play an important and integral part in Carol's life for the simple reason that they too felt the conflict with the conformities of the town.

Miles Bjornstam, known as 'The Red Swede,' and the one Democrat in town, was looked upon as a Bolshevik of sorts with radical ideas. But he was the handiest man in town and much sought after to attend the furnaces and plumbing when winter came. For this reason he was tolerated, but grudgingly, by the Republicans.

Carol was drawn to this intelligent, self-educated man who shrewdly analyzed the hypocrisies of the town and its social castes. Like Carol he knew there was need for reform -- drastic and dramatic.

> You see I'm not interested in these dinky reforms . . . trying to repair holes in this barnacle covered ship of a town by keeping busy bailing out the water. Me, I want to yank it up on the ways, and fire the poor bum of a shoe-maker that built it so it sails crooked, and have it rebuilt right, from the keel up.[21]

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[20] Ibid., p. 105.

[21] Ibid., p. 116.

Miles Bjornstam, self styled as the only man in Johnson County that remembered the joker in the Declaration of Independence about Americans being supposed to have the right to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, dared to sass condescending men and refuse their patronage. Yet for all his cynicism, Miles yearned for acceptance by the 'group,' as did Carol. With this man Carol could open up her heart and mind as she could never hope to with any matron in town. When Miles and Bea Sorenson, Carol's maid, were married, Miles attempted to conform for the sake of his family. He even tried to covet the friendship of men he had once taunted and criticized, but the town was unwilling to forget or to recognize the former impertinence of an upstart handyman. One of the bitterest indictments of vicious prejudice which Lewis leveled against Gopher Prairie was its cold rejection of the Bjornstams. And in no other instance does Carol rise above the town so greatly as in her befriending of this family.

Despite Carol's crusade for their recognition the Bjornstams were ignored socially. Miles, despite his innate kindness and good nature, had one fault -- a refusal to conform to the town's own stylized conservatism. Only when Miles' son and his wife lay in mortal illness were they graced with a social call.

> Miles looked steadily at the three women. 'You're too late. You can't do nothing now. Bea's always kind of hoped that you folks would come see her. She wanted to have a chance and be friends. She used to sit waiting for somebody to knock. I've

> seen her sitting here waiting. Now you ain't worth . . . damning! He shut the door.[22]

And so Miles Bjornstam left Gopher Prairie at the death of his wife and child to look for a farm in Canada remote from all people. Champ Perry, Civil War veteran, but too old for World War I, rebuked Miles at the station -- called him a blasphemer and a traitor who only bought one Liberty Bond.[23] There were reports that Miles was unable to reply in his guilt, but some said that:

> Miles made some dreadful seditious report: something about loving German workmen more than American bankers . . . He must have felt guilty, everybody agreed, for as the train left town, a farmer saw him standing in the vestibule and looking out.[24]

Thus left the strongest and yet the weakest of the outcasts of Gopher Prairie. And when Carol reminisced sadly over the toys and other mementos at the deserted Sorenson household one day, she realized wistfully that she had lost some people very dear to her. Moreover, a friend and reformer had been defeated by the prejudices and conformities of the town, one braver and more courageous than she, she felt.

Sinclair Lewis once declared that he originally intended the chief character of Main Street to be Guy Pollock, a young lawyer ". . . who started practice in a prairie village

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[22] Ibid., pp. 321-2.

[23] Ibid., p. 323.

[24] Loc. cit.

and spiritually starved."[25] Furthermore, Lewis identified Guy Pollock with himself, but this is almost too incongrous to believe. Even when Lewis was courting his first wife, Grace Hegger Lewis, with his "Tennyson and water" verses, colloquial and nonsensical things, it is too farfetched to assume he was of the same ilk as the pallid prairie attorney. Lewis declared at another time that Carol was Red Lewis:

> Always groping for something she isn't capable of attaining, always dissatisfied, always restlessly straining to see what lies just above the horizon intolerant of her surroundings, yet lacking any clearly defined vision of what she really wants to be.[26]

With the departure of Miles Bjornstam, the strongest of Carol's liberal friends, she sought solace in Guy Pollock, the weakest, most pathetic, and most discerning victim of the "village virus." By chance, one evening, Carol had occasion to talk to Guy Pollock alone in his law office. "Tell me, Mr. Pollock," she implored, "what is the matter with Gopher Prairie?"[27]

> There's one thing wrong with Gopher Prairie, he replied . . . there is a ruling class, despite all our professions of democracy. And the penalty we tribal rulers pay is that our subjects watch us every minute. We can't get wholesomely drunk and relax. We have to be correct about our

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[25]Maul and Cane, op. cit., pp. 214-5.

[26]C. Breasted, "Sauk Eccentricities of Sinclair Lewis," Saturday Review of Literature, 37:7-8, August 14, 1954.

[27]Sinclair Lewis, op. cit., p. 157-8.

> sex morals, and wear inconspicuous clothes, and doing our commercial trickery only in the traditional ways, that none of us can live up to it, and we become horribly hypocritical. . . . It's the historical Anglo-Saxon way of making life miserable . . .[28]

Guy Pollock, product of an Ohio town even more insular than Gopher Prairie, had found freedom and salvation in New York for four years. As a Columbia Law School graduate he showed promise and potentiality, but circumstances had led him back to the provinces and eternal stagnation.

> I was born in an Ohio town about the same size as Gopher Prairie, and much less friendly. It'd had more generations in which to form an oligarchy of respectability. Here, a stranger is taken in if he is correct, if he likes hunting and motoring and God and our Senator. There, we didn't take in even our own till we had contemptuously got used to them.[29]

Except for one brief interlude in his life, Guy Pollock had never been able to avoid the "village virus." Now, listless and neglected, he had neither the will nor desire to ward off its malignancy. Carol implored, "Guy! Can't we do something with the town? Really?"[30]

But the attorney could offer no solution except to point out further faults of the community of which Carol had been vaguely unaware. Lewis explains the lawyer's philosophy:

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[28] Ibid., p. 158.

[29] Ibid., p. 156.

[30] Ibid., p. 158.

> The worst is the commercial hatred -- the grocer feeling that any man who doesn't deal with him is robbing him. What hurts me is that it applies to doctors and lawyers (and decidedly to their wives) as much as grocers.[31]

Although she was aware of her husband's fairness regarding his fees, Carol was disturbed by Guy's implications. Shrewdly, she forced Dr. Kennicott into admitting that professional jealousy and penny pinching did exist among the doctors in town. Guy's accusations ran unpleasantly through her mind.

Although Carol and Miles had bantered one another about "fleeing the country together," their personal conduct had been honest and impeccable. They had shared a mutual respect for the sincerity and integrity in each other which was stimulating and wholesome. And if Carol had felt sympathy and compassion for Guy Pollock, it was because she was also fearful of losing her own individualism and identity. Here too, the relationship had been kindred but uninvolved. The expression, "Caesar's wife must be above suspicion," applied, and Carol had invited trouble by her ingenuous but careless conduct. Meeting such men in their own retreats could cause censure and misunderstanding. Her next liaison with a fellow outcast imperiled her position in town and brought a showdown between her and her husband. Once again, conformity was the issue.

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[31] Ibid., p. 158.

Since Kennicott could not solve Carol's dilemma in understanding the town's social mores, she had sought sustenance unsuccessfully from two older men. Now Carol reversed roles to help not only herself, but the youthful Erik Valborg to find significance and purpose in Gopher Prairie. In befriending the aspiring tailor who hated his job and yearned for culture, Carol attempted to solve her problems vicariously. Fearful of failure yet aspiring to a New York career in decoration and design, Erik eagerly confided his dreams to Carol, who urged:

> What if you do have to go back? Most of us do! We can't all be artists -- myself for instance. We have to darn socks, and yet we're not content to think of nothing but socks and darning cotton. I'd demand all I could get -- whether I finally settled down to designing frocks or building temples or pressing pants. What if you do drop back? You'll have had the adventure. Don't be too meek toward life! Go! You're young, you're unmarried. Try everything! . . . You're still a blessed innocent. Go and play till the Good People capture you![32]

Contrary to Carol's intentions, the young man mistook her lofty idealism and advice not as counsel, but as an indication of unhappy marital life.

Ardent and impressionable, Erik's passionate and devoted attention to Carol left her confused. She felt her youth slipping and remembered the words of a rare confidante, Mrs. Flickenbaugh, the tall, thin, twitchy wife of the

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[32] Ibid., pp. 342-3.

attorney: " . . . I've hated it for thirty-two years. I'll die here -- and I'll hate it till I die. . . ."[33]

Horrified, Carol speculated about her future. Would she some day so despise herself and her neighbors that she too would walk Main Street an old, skinny, and eccentric woman? Could she find freedom with the younger Valborg, she wondered? Fearful yet defiant, she courted gossip associating her with her protege. Only her social position protected Dr. Kennicott's wife from the same scandal which Fern Mullins, the young high school teacher, had unjustly suffered.

The climax to Carol and Erik's serious but sinless relationship occurred when Kennicott, returning from a call one wet night, met them along the road. Their innocent walk nevertheless did appear indiscreet, but Kennicott handled the situation with firmness and grace.

Healthy and reliable, stubborn but good-natured, rustic but wise, Will Kennicott is one of Sinclair Lewis's most masterfully drawn characters. His honest analysis of Carol's plight endears the reader to this man whose wife cannot adjust to his native environment that he loves so well.

After Kennicott had taken Erik to his place, and they had driven home, Carol awaited the inevitable showdown with her husband. "Well, Carrie, you better --" He chucked his own coat on a chair, stalked by her, went on with a rising, tingling

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[33] Ibid., pp. 324-5.

voice:

> . . . you better cut it out now. I'm not going to do the outraged husband stunt. I like you and I respect you, and I'd probably look like a boob if I tried to be dramatic. But I think it's about time for you and Valborg to call a halt before you get in Dutch, like Fern Mullins did.
>
> Do you . . .
>
> Course, I know all about it. What d'you expect in a town that's as filled with busybodies . . . as this is? Not that they'd hinted around a lot, and anyway, I could see for myself that you liked him. But of course I knew how cold you were. I knew you wouldn't stand it even if Valborg did try to kiss you, so I didn't worry. But same time, I hope you don't suppose this husky young Swede farmer is as innocent and Platonic and all that stuff as you are . . . I'm not knocking him. He isn't a bad sort. And he's young and likes to gas about books. Course you like him. That isn't the real rub. . . . Don't you realize that if Ma Westlake and a few others got started they'd drive you up a tree, and you'd find yourself so well advertised as being in love with this Valborg fellow that you'd have to be, just to spite 'em![34]

Wearily, but with some spirit, Carol defended Erik as being an artist and not just a farmer. Besides she admired him because he aroused something within her breast.

Speaking as his own counsel Dr. Kennicott defended himself:

> Wait now! He's had a chance all evening to tell you what a whale of a fine fellow he is. Now it's my turn. I can't talk artistic, but -- Carrie, do you understand my work . . . No matter even if you are cold, I like you better than anybody in the world. One time I said you were my soul. And that

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[34] Ibid., pp. 395-6.

> still goes. You're all the fine things I see in a sunset when I'm driving in from the country, the things that I like but can't make poetry of. Do you realize what my job is? I go round twenty-four hours a day, in wind and blizzard, trying my damndest to heal everybody, rich or poor . . . and I can stand the cold and the bumpy roads and the lonely rides at night. All I need is to have you here to welcome me . . . and then you go and moon over a Swede tailor because he can talk about how to put ruchings on a skirt.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> What has he actually done in the art line? Has he done one first-class picture or -- sketch, d'you call it? Or one poem, or played the piano, or anything except gas about what he's going to do . . . can't you see that it's just by contrast with folks like Doc McGanum or Lym Cass that this fellow seems artistic? . . .[35]

When Kennicott forecast Carol's future with Erik -- failure, a squalid tailor shop, immigrant relatives, and children by the score -- the doctor's logic prevailed.

> She snatched up his hand and kissed it. Presently she sobbed, 'I won't ever see him again. I can't, now. The hot living room behind the tailor shop -- I don't love him enough for that. And you are -- Even if I were sure of him, sure he was the real thing, I don't think I could actually leave you. This marriage, it weaves people together. It's not easy to break, even when it ought to be broken . . .'[36]

Once again Carol had conformed. A letter from Eric stated he had left town. Once again a friend with whom she had sought rapport and understanding of Main Street had departed leaving her as unsettled as ever.

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[35] Ibid., pp. 396-7.

[36] Ibid., p. 398.

> It was a street beyond the end of the world, beyond the boundaries of hope. Though she should sit here forever, no one who was interesting, would come by. It was tediousness made tangible, a street built of lassitude and of futility.[37]

But it was a struggle greater than Carol's clash with Main Street which was to take her away from Gopher Prairie --- World War I! To the townspeople, Carol's departure for Washington, D.C., was an extended visit, but for Kennicott and her it was a trial separation.

Carol's work and life in wartime Washington were stimulating and different, but the manners and mode of life of the younger, hard, brilliant people dejected her. When a couple from Gopher Prairie dropped in on her unexpectedly, she clung to them. At a restaurant she imagined the other patrons were sneering at her friends, and she glared back, defending her own, daring the world not to appreciate them.

> Then waving to them, she lost them down the long train shed . . . Beyond Chicago ---? She saw the lakes and stubble fields, heard the rhythm of insects and the squeak of a buggy, was greeted by Sam Clark's 'Well how's the little lady?'
>
> Nobody in Washington cared enough to fret about her sins as Sam did.[38]

Kennicott came to Washington to see Carol, humble yet persuasive. His deep love for her made Carol reappraise her husband. He was gentle, understanding, and patient. Instead

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[37] Ibid., p. 325.

[38] Ibid., p. 432.

of trying to drag her home, he wisely left her with the plea to make up her own mind about returning.

> She was relieved . . . But she also had a firmer respect for Kennicott. She had fancied that her life might make a story. She knew that there was nothing heroic or obviously dramatic in it, no magic of rare hours, nor valiant challenge, but it seemed to her that she was of some significance because she was commonplace, the ordinary life of the age, made articulate and protesting. It had not occurred to her that there was also a story of Will Kennicott, into which she entered only so much as he entered into hers; that he had bewilderments and concealments as intricate as her own, and soft treacherous desires for sympathy.[39]

And so Carol returned to Gopher Prairie and Will Kennicott not, however, humbled, as her memorable words indicated: "I may not have fought the good fight, but I have kept the faith."[40] Life would go on as before, but age and experience would enable her to endure it, still rebelliously, but with more confidence and poise.

Many critics have failed to understand the purpose of Sinclair Lewis. Gapher Prairie seems to be a peculiar and isolated sector of Midwestern customs and foibles rather than the ubiquitous and international symbol of smugness and complacency. Jane Austen and George Eliot, who also could write novels of manners and prides and prejudices, were the progenitors of Sinclair Lewis in accurately portraying the tribulations of small towns.

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[39] Ibid., p. 439.

[40] Ibid., p. 451.

No less a critic than Bernard De Voto accused Lewis of caricature, avoiding reality, and unjustly misrepresenting a small town because it would not always accept the adolescent ideas of Carol Kennicott.[41]

The critic, Charles Baldwin, concurred with De Voto when he asserted:

> . . . An author's characters are so many facets of his own personality. He must love even the meanest of them . . . He can speak only for the one through himself no matter what the disguises he puts on. In Main Street Lewis has failed to pretend that he is not as these others are. Dr. Kennicott and Carol and Guy Pollock and Vida Sherwin . . . and the rest . . . for in his itch to reform . . . he is as ridiculous and as pathetic . . . The failure of Main Street . . . is due to Lewis's want of a feeling of humanity with the people he satirizes. He kicks them, abuses them . . . his kind, and he cannot kick them and abuse them with impunity.[42]

Carol Kennicott -- pathetic, perhaps -- ridiculous and adolescent -- never! Her plea for civic improvement was no more ridiculous than the work of chambers of commerce and city planning commissions. Her compassion for the poor and downtrodden was ennobling. Nor did she ever plot against anyone nor make malicious gossip. The merry little party that she gave was an innocent and beautiful attempt to make people laugh and enjoy themselves. Certainly there was

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[41]Bernard De Voto, The Literary Fallacy (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1944), p. 175.

[42]Charles C. Baldwin, The Men Who Make Our Novels (New York, Dodd Mead and Company, 1928), p. 330.

nothing ridiculous or adolescent in this slim, dark girl's sincere desire to make life beautiful for herself and those around her.

Sinclair Lewis worshipped his father and admitted that Doctor Kennicott was a portrait of him. In an interview, shortly before his father's death, Lewis said sadly:

> My father has never forgiven me for Main Street. When I saw him a few weeks ago, we shook hands -- but he can't comprehend the book, much less grasp that it's the greatest tribute I knew how to pay him. He felt that I should have served an honored profession by becoming a doctor myself, instead of derogating and besmirching it in a book libeling my own birthplace. Main Street condemned me in his eyes as a traitor to my heritage -- whereas the truth is, I shall never shed the little indelible "Sauk-centricities."[43]

Misunderstood by many critics, as well as his own father, Sinclair Lewis stated his own purpose understandably and clearly!

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[43]C. Breasted, op. cit., p. 8.

BABBITT

Babbitt is in many ways a better novel than Main Street. The satire is more skillful because it is light and sure, swift and revealing. While Main Street is heavy and episodic, often pedestrian, Babbitt is brisk and entertaining, easy to follow, and tightly constructed. It reads so quickly that there is a tendency for the reader to skip along almost too swiftly and thereby miss the frequent doubles entendres that Sinclair Lewis can pack with such cleverness into a word or line.

If Carol Kennicott was a rebellious reformer, disenchanted with the waste lands of Gopher Prairie, George F. Babbitt was the most happy fellow in his native, -- well, almost native, -- city of Zenith with its towers aspiring high above the morning mist, neither citadels nor churches, but frankly and beautifully office buildings.[1]

From his Dutch colonial home in the well-to-do residential district of Floral Heights, Babbitt could look out of the window and discern among the pinnacles of steel and cement

> . . . the top of the Second National Tower, Indiana limestone building of thirty-five stories. Its shining walls rose against the April sky to a simple cornice like a streak of

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[1]Sinclair Lewis, Babbitt (New York: Grossett and Dunlap Company, 1922), p. 1.

> white fire. Integrity was in the tower and decision. It bore its strength lightly as a tall soldier.[2]

Babbitt stared in reverence at this lovely sight and felt rejuvenated with his love and inspiration for this magnificant Middle-Western city of almost a half-million population.

> He beheld the tower as the temple spire of the religion of business, a faith passionate, exalted, surpassing common men; and as he clumped down to breakfast he whistled the ballad 'Oh, by gee, by gosh, by jingo' as though it were a hymn melancholy and noble.[3]

George F. Babbitt lived in a world of standardization, and that is the way he wanted it. His home reflected this and so did his habits. Above all things, Babbitt wanted to follow the middle road with his fellow men. He was an active member of the Boosters' Club, and he associated with men who were nice and human and important in business circles.[4]

A country boy and a State University graduate, but with unfulfilled law ambitions, Babbitt had come to the city and had made good.

> . . . he made nothing in particular, neither butter nor olives nor poetry, but he was nimble in the calling of selling houses for more than people could afford.[5]

Now in his forty-sixth year in April, 1920, Babbitt

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[2] Ibid., p. 13.

[3] Ibid., p. 13.

[4] Ibid., p. 10.

[5] Ibid., p. 2.

was considered an irreproachable citizen, respected and admired in his community, a devoted Sunday school leader, and the very model of a modern American husband and father.

Although Babbitt had bounce and vigor, and a shiny roundness to him, he was as standard as the tile and nickel plate bathroom fixtures of his and a thousand other Zenith homes. His wife Myra was less colorful.

> She had become so dully habituated to married life that in her full matronliness she was as sexless as an anemic nun. She was a good woman, but no one, save perhaps Tinka, her ten year old daughter, was at all interested in her or entirely aware that she was alive.[6]

A boy of high school age, Ted Roosevelt Babbitt, more interested in mechanics and the girl next door than his future college career, and a rather serious and settled daughter Verona, just graduated from Bryn Mawr, constituted the rest of the Babbitt family.

A careless critic has stated that when Babbitt drove to work in the morning, proud of the skill with which he maneuvered his Buick through traffic, he was unaware of the life-and-death tragedies which had transpired in Zenith during the previous night, sordid scenes like that of the lady full of cocaine who had drawn a pistol from her purse and casually shot her lover across the table in a speakeasy.[7] (Actually,

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[6]Ibid., p. 7.

[7]Gerald W. Johnson, "Romance and Babbitt," New Republic, 124:14-15, June, 1928.

the lady threw her cup at the cocaine runner's head. He worked his revolver out of the pocket of his sleeve and shot her.)

No one was more interested in the direction of the town's growth than George F. Babbitt, realtor. He was very much aware of the "nicer" physical characteristics of Zenith: the attractive suburban areas, the busy, modern well-lighted factories, the marble and granite office buildings; and he was particularly intrigued by billboards with goddesses nine feet tall.

But there was certain things that Babbitt was naive about. For instance: school conditions and teachers' salaries, the size of the fire department, the adequacy of the city and county jails, and whether the police department was affiliated with gambling and prostitution. He never had investigated these things intensively because the Advocate-Times, owned by Colonel Rutherford Snow of the Good Citizens' League, had never shown any cause for alarm in these matters.

As for "vice-districts," those were things that no decent man monkeyed with.

> . . . Besides, he reasoned, s'matter of fact, I'll tell you confidentially; it's a protection to our daughters and decent women to have a district where tough nuts can raise cain. Keeps 'em away from our homes.[8]

Yet within a short time, Babbitt was to explore the nether

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[8]Sinclair Lewis, op. cit., p. 44.

sector of Zenith and to become involved in a series of escapades which threatened to destroy his fine reputation in his community and business life.

As Babbitt approached fifty, he began to experience vague feelings of unrest, despite his success in the material world. Perhaps the angels, not half so happy in heaven, were envying him. At any rate, for some time now, a fairy child has been visiting him regularly in his dreams, a slim, ethereal, delicate creature with slim, beckoning arms. Together they fled from those who sought to follow them and they romped gleefully in a pastoral setting. But just as they were ready to sail away on a perfumed sea, their idyl would be interrupted by the rumble and crash of the mortal milkman as he made his morning deliveries.

In the meantime, Babbitt was made a precinct leader in the electioneering campaign, and through his efforts, the "radical-intellectual," Seneca Doane, was defeated. Furthermore, Babbitt was elected vice-president of the Boosters' Club and was getting extensive newspaper coverage for his speaking ability.

But Babbitt was still somewhat distressed. When he saw his beloved friend, Paul Reisling, a sensitive and artistic man, out with another woman, Babbitt was shocked. He lectured Paul, but the latter was indifferent, and Babbitt secretly admired Paul's outlook about the affair. When Paul

accidentally shot his wife and was sent to prison, something snapped inside Babbitt.[9]

Although he had peered uneasily at every graceful ankle and soft shoulder, never in all twenty-three years of Babbitt's married life had he hazarded respectability by adventuring.[10] A sudden illness in his wife's family and her extended out-of-town visit provided Babbitt with an opportunity to philander. He entered into an irregular relationship with one of his female clients and through her became associated with a Bohemian group called the "Bunch." Many in this group were far younger than he. In an attempt to submerge the loneliness and restrictions of middle age, Babbitt made love ardently, drank prohibition liquor recklessly, and abused his health in general.

This sudden spirit of independence was reflected in his attitude at the Club. He defended the liberal leader, Seneca Doane, sympathized with strikers, and refused to be coerced into joining the "Good Citizens' League." These rebellions irked his associates considerably. But for once Babbitt disdained to follow the pack.

His fellow Booster member, Virgil Gunch, called on Babbitt and asked him to join a new organization whose function he explained:

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[9]Ibid., p. 3.

[10]Ibid., p. 37.

> You know during the war we had the 'Undesirable Element,' the Reds and walking delegates and just plain common grouches, dead to rights, and so did we for quite a while after the war, but folks forgot about the danger and that gives those cranks a chance to begin working underground again, especially these parlor socialists. Well, it's up to the folks that do a little sound thinking to make a conscious effort to keep bucking these fellows. Some guy back East has organized a society called the "Good Citizen's League" for just that purpose. Of course, the Chamber of Commerce and the American Legion . . . do fine work in keeping the decent people in the saddle, but they're devoted to so many other causes that they can't attend to this one properly. . . . We've already got some of the strongest men in town, and of course we want you in. How about it?[11]

Babbitt resisted the invitation. Somehow, though, everything seemed to be going wrong at home and at the office. His rapport with the Club members was dismal, and he felt uneasy about the double life he was leading. He seemed unable to cope with all this freedom.

His wife's acute illness suddenly awakened a well of compassion and love in Babbitt for this gentle, trusting woman whom he had neglected and abused. Blubbering his love, he clasped her hand and realized that Myra was more than just a wife; she was the image of his heart and soul.

The thoughtfulness of the "Booster Club" members and their wives to Myra during her illness and convalesence melted the chill which had existed between Babbitt and his fellow club members. By the time of his wife's recovery,

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[11] Ibid., pp. 345-6.

Babbitt had disentangled himself from certain personal and social alliances, had joined the "Good Citizens' League," and had completely forgotten about once renouncing it as an organization suppressing freedom of thought. His club members rejoiced to find "Georgie" an even more active Booster than he had been before. He was once more a conformist!

The critics were intrigued and saw in Babbitt, Sinclair Lewis's satire of the average American business man. Henry Seidel Canby interpreted Babbitt as the representative of a class living in a civilization where mechanism had gone beyond its wildest dreams.

> . . . They roll upon asphalt, bathe in porcelain . . . profit by a credit system that stretches across the ocean, are lapped about by insurance, guarded by a public security that makes hazard an accident, can use words for religion since fear is far off, and whose souls are too fat to yearn.[12]

The Europeans of the post World War I period, greatly impoverish by the conflict and in debt to Uncle Sam, paid tribute to Sinclair Lewis for his convincing picture of the uncultured American utilitarian. H. G. Wells wrote to Sinclair Lewis:

> I want to write praise. Babbitt is what we can call a creation . . . he is the common

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[12]H. S. Canby, "Schmaltz, Babbitt and Co.," Saturday Review of Literature, 4:697-8, March 24, 1928.

> American business man . . . none has been anywhere near getting him before. He lives and breathes another atmosphere! He moves about his business, his vile gregariousness, his vulgarity and - what is the hope of America - his suffering and struggling determinations /undecipherable/ of beauty, are all wonderfully done. . . .[13]

If Babbitt typified American materialism, Sir Gerald Doakes was his British counterpart. The English peer, who had been feted and claimed by the captivated queen of Zenith society, Mrs. Lucile McKelvey, was just another lonely businessman in a strange town when Babbitt recognized him in a Chicago hotel lounge. Babbitt's exclusion from the ultra-society circles of the McKelveys had hardly permitted him to become acquainted with Sir Gerald, but before this evening was over, they had become devoted friends.

> It was after the third drink that Sir Gerald proclaimed, 'How do you Yankees get the notion that writing chaps like Bertrand Shaw and Wells represent us, The real business England, we think those chaps are traitors. Both our countries have their comic 'Old Aristocracy' --- you know, old country families, hunting people and all that sort of thing -- and we both have our backbones of sound businessmen who run the whole show.
>
> 'You bet. Here's the real guys!'
>
> I'm with you! Here's to ourselves!'[14]

Many drinks later the two men parted regretfully. Sir

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[13]Grace Hegger Lewis, With Love from Gracie - Sinclair Lewis 1912-1925 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1955), p. 335.

[14]Sinclair Lewis, op. cit., p. 247-8.

Gerald reminded Babbitt cordially:

> . . . And don't forget, old boy, if you ever come to Nottingham, Mother and I will be frightfully glad to see you. I shall tell the fellows in Nottingham about your ideas about Vision and Real Guys -- at our next Rotary Club luncheon.[15]

In some areas, the French press praised Sinclair Lewis for his presentation of the soulless example of the American 'nouveaux riche.'

> Andre Levinson, in the Paris literary and political gossip, Candide, said: 'This hero of mediocrity, this standardized man become a mere automaton . . . his name is a symbol of the average American -- one hundred percent. Babbitt is a 'character' for which Labrugère gave the word. His story is a manual for the study of a whole society. Mr. Lewis shows the vacuity, the triviality, the features of middle-class life in America. He puts to shame the agitated sterility of dollar chasing.[16]

One British writer, sarcastically noted that:

> . . . Lewis's great achievement is the nailing down in fiction of a certain kind of mediocrity . . . he locates it in provincial America, but /it/ is to be found wherever . . . wages are high, education is free, cinemas flourish, and government is of the people, by the people, and for the people. . . .[17]

The Europeans' appreciation and understanding for

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[15]Ibid., p. 248.

[16]H. L. Binesse, "Europe Looks at Sinclair Lewis," Bookman, 72:453-7, January, 1931.

[17]Anonymous, "British View of Sinclair Lewis's Prize," Literary Digest, 107-19, December 6, 1930.

Sinclair Lewis's satire and whimsy were never more naive, however, than when they reported on one of his remarks made at the Nobel Prize reception:

> 'He announces that he will use the proceeds of the prize to support a well-known young American author and his family in a manner that will enable him to continue writing.' A French paper congratulated Mr. Lewis on his generosity, while the Reuter dispatch innocently adds: 'There is at present no indication as to the identity of the young author whom Mr. Lewis has in mind.[18]

One thing that Sinclair Lewis did make clear when he received the Nobel Prize in 1930 was the tragedy of

> . . . man trying to maintain himself as the image of God under the pressure of dynamos in a world of high salesmanship . . . that America . . . with all its wealth and power, has not yet produced a civilization good enough to satisfy the deepest wants of human creatures.[19]

But if this was a problem America was experiencing, it was also one that the world has been unsuccessful in solving before and during the machine age.

George Babbitt's world of the ninteen-twenties has often been referred to as the "Mad Decade" or "The Roaring Twenties." According to one historian:

> . . . the whole country had been infected and over the entire country there was sweeping a wave of greed, of extravagance, of idleness, and of devil-may-care defiance of all the principles of

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[18] Ibid., p. 109.

[19] H. L. Binesse, loc. cit., p. 455.

economics and morals.[20]

But it was also a boom period of prosperity that was to last until the nineteen-twenty-nine depression, and if Babbitt sold houses to people for more than they could afford, there was logic in the supposition that the high cost of a house today might be a bargain price tomorrow.

It was also a time when conservatives were frightened by socialism. A labor organization known as the I. W. W. - the Industrial Workers of the World - hoped to bring about a "social revolution",

> . . . They wished to have the workers take over all the instruments of production and transportation and abolish the wage system. In some sections of the country they became famous for the violence of their methods. They were also held responsible for some outrages in which they had no part.[21]

Many people feared that the Communists were trying to control the unions.

> In November, 1919, acting under orders of the Secretary of Labor, federal agents arrested over 250 agitators in various parts of the country. . . . On December 21, following a recommendation of Attorney-General A. Mitchell Palmer, 249 radical aliens were loaded on the transport Buford - known as the Soviet Ark - and shipped to Russia, where they were expected to find a more congenial home. Hundreds more were held in prison.[22]

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[20]Ralph Harlow, Story of America (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1947), p. 607.

[21]Ibid., p. 608. The word "notorious" would be more appropriate than "famous" in this quote.

[22]Ibid., p. 609.

All the more reason why Vergil Gunch wanted Babbitt in the "Good Citizens' League."

This was also the period of the United States' experimentation with prohibition. The bootlegger and the speakeasy had become recognized features of our social system, and the law enforcement agencies were extremely lax in the performance of their duties. When Babbitt patronized a local bootlegger for the purpose of livening up his wife's dinner party, perhaps his biggest crime was his hypocrisy in agreeing with one of the guests' statements:

> I'd have arranged it so that the drinker himself was licensed, and then we could have taken care of the shiftless workman -- kept him from drinking -- and yet not have interfered with the rights -- the personal liberty -- of fellows like ourselves.[23]

If Babbitt was a believer in conventionalism at this time, so was the church with its theories of fundamentalism. After his period of defection, during which time Babbitt had criticized his minister, Lewis noted satirically that "Babbitt . . . knelt while Drew gloated: 'Oh, Lord . . . our brother has been led astray by manifold temptations . . . let him know again the joy of manly courage to abstain from evil -- '"[24] The prodigal son had returned to the fold.

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[23]Sinclair Lewis, op. cit., p. 115.

[24]Ibid., p. 394.

Throughout this period, a spirit of disillusionment was reflected in the works of many readers. Men like Ernest Hemingway, Edgar Lee Masters, and Rupert Hughes felt that human beings were lacking in fundamental decencies. Many critics identified Sinclair Lewis as the arch-spokesman of his group. They though of him as one of the angriest young men and a savage satirist. Henry Seidel Canby asked:

> . . . why does Lewis so bitterly hate this smug bourgeoisie whose round faces . . . one has seen before in Dutch pictures and in frescoes of late Rome? . . . no one, probably not even Lewis, believes that the everyday American is as bad as all that. . . .[25]

One of the biggest fallacies and delusions that critics could believe in was that Sinclair Lewis hated Babbitt. In 1923, Lewis said:

> . . . If it is necessary to be Fabian in politics, to keep the reformers (left-wing or rigid right) from making us perfect too rapidly, it is yet more necessary to be a little doubtful about ardent souls who would sell culture; and if the 'tired business man' is unlovely and a little dull, at least he is real, and we shall build only on reality. . . .[26]

In 1950, shortly before his death, Lewis said:

> I like Babbitt. I just can't stand that boisterous sense of humor he has, like, 'Hello, you old horse thief, how the hell are you?' But people get Babbitt wrong.

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[25]Henry Seidel Canby, op. cit., p. 698.

[26]Sinclair Lewis, "Minnesota, the Norse State," Nation, 116:624-7, May 30, 1923.

> Some of them/Babbitt and business men/ collect pretty fine books, and others are really socially conscious.[27]

Asked if he thought Babbitt was the same today, Lewis replied that he thought so, except that perhaps he knows more:

> I've spoken to Rotary Clubs and invariably a Babbitt stands up and says: 'I guess Mr. Lewis will know now that Babbitt isn't Babbitt after all.'[28]

There was much of Babbitt in Sinclair Lewis. He shared the same distrust for pretenders, faddists, and radicals. He loved to use the slang Babbitt used, and he was shrewd in his business dealings. His letters show the same "zip" that George Babbitt was so fond of using in the make-up of his real estate ads. Writing to Alfred Harcourt about the sale of Main Street, he advised:

> Dear Alf:
>
> Two good letters from you just came. 'Shall we say fifteen percent after 60,000 and give us $2,000 more to spend on ads till spring?' says you. Sure! And still more for ads, if you want it -- let's try to keep her going -- maybe after the smoke from the Porter-Harold Bell-Lincoln-Curwood et al battle, of this early fall has cleared away, they'll

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[27]J. A. Barry, "Sinclair Lewis, 65 and Far From Main Street," New York Times Magazine, p. 13, February 5, 1950.

[28]Ibid., p. 17. Lewis was referring to the publication of Gene Stratton Porter's Her Father's Daughter, Doubleday; Haroled Bell Wright's Helen of the Old House, Appleton; Joseph Lincoln's Galusha the Magnificant, Appleton; and James Oliver Curwood's God's Country, Cosmopolital Book Corporation.

> find us marching right on, and I'm for constant insertions thru into the spring. So count on me for any cooperation you wish.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> Our very best! You gotta come over this winter, and come see us in Italy, and have - a - drink . . . two drinks - - -.
>
> As ever, and in some haste, and some grubbiness of having worked all day.
>
> SL[29]

More than anything, the redeeming quality which Sinclair Lewis gave to Babbitt that makes him so likeable, despite his philandering and orthodoxies, is a certain understanding that he retained for those who might still want to be individuals in this world. When his son Ted eloped, quit college, and told Babbitt that he wanted to become a mechanic, Babbitt was floored. But he recovered quickly:

> Well, Babbitt meditated . . . I've never done a thing I've wanted to do in my old life! I don't know 's I've accomplished anything except just get along. . . Well, maybe you'll carry things on further. I don't know. But I do get a kind of sneaking pleasure out of the fact that you knew what you wanted to do and did it. Well, those folks in there will try to bully you and tame you down. Tell 'em to go to the devil! I'll back you. Take your factory job, if you want to. Don't be scared of the family. No, nor all Zenith, nor of yourself the way I've been. Go ahead,

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[29]Harrison Smith, From Main Street to Stockholm, Letters of Sinclair Lewis 1919-1930 (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1952), p. 83.

old man! The world is yours!

Arms about each other's shoulders, the Babbitt men marched into the living room and faced the 'swooping' family.[30]

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[30]Sinclair Lewis, op. cit., p. 401.

ARROWSMITH

Just as he had felt an inward pressure to write Main Street, so did Sinclair Lewis feel a similar urge to produce Arrowsmith, the story of a physician and scientist. Proud of his medical heritage (there were doctors on both sides of the family, as well as his father and brother), it seemed a natural consequence for Lewis to write about a subject he had been a part of since early youth. His father, Dr. Lewis, had never quite approved of Dr. Kennicott of Main Street, but in Martin Arrowsmith he could find virtues which exalted the medical commandments and he could beam approval at the complete dedication to medical and scientific research.

Because the reading public has always been more or less partial to books about doctors, Arrowsmith has remained one of the most popular of Lewis's novels. Another reason for its favor is probably that it satirized commercial science rather than the many foibles of the average American middle class, thus giving the reader an opportunity to enjoy Lewis's satire more or less detachedly.

At any rate, Lewis was offered the Pulitzer Prize in 1926 in recognition of this outstanding novel. Piqued because he felt he had been cheated of the prize in 1921 for Main Street, Lewis rejected the award and thereby created a furor. Actually, Lewis had cause for grievance. A noted panel comprising the Pulitzer Prize Committee had chosen Main Street

for the palm ". . . but the judges rejected their momination and selected Edith Wharton's The Age of Innocence."[1] Biding his time, Lewis planned his revenge carefully. In a letter to Alfred Harcourt of Harcourt, Brace and Company he openly confessed:

> I hope they do award me the Pulitzer Prize on Arrowsmith - but you know, don't you that ever since the Main Street burglary, I have planned that if they ever did award it to me, I would refuse it, with a polite but firm letter which I shall let the press have, and which ought to make it impossible for anyone ever to accept the novel prize (not the play or history prize) thereafter without acknowledging themselves as willing to sell out. . . .[2]

As Alfred Harcourt had predicted, Sinclair Lewis was tendered the laurel he had once sought and now spurned. In a letter to the Pulitzer Prize Committee, Lewis had this to say:

> I wish to acknowledge your choice of my novel Arrowsmith for the Pulitzer Prize. That prize I must refuse . . . all prizes, like all titles are dangerous. The seekers for prizes tend to labor not for inherent excellence but for alien rewards; they tend to write this, or timorously to avoid writing that, in order to tickle the prejudices of a haphazard committee. . . . There is a general belief that the administrators of the prize are a pontifical body with a discernment and power to grant the prize as the ultimate proof of merit . . . though . . . the administrators can,

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[1]Harrison Smith, editor, From Main Street to Stockholm: Letters of Sinclair Lewis - 1919-1930. (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1952), p. 203.

[2]Ibid., p. 203.

> and sometimes do, quite arbitrarily reject the recommendations of their supposed advisors. If already the Pulitzer Prize is so important, it is not absurd to suggest . . . that the administrators of the prize may become a supreme court, a college of cardinals, so rooted and so sacred that to challenge them will be to commit blasphemy. . . . Only by regularly refusing the Pulitzer Prize can novelists keep such a power from being permanently set up over them. . . .[3]

Nothing quite like this had ever occurred before in American letters. There was as much truth as vindictiveness in Lewis's accusation and refusal. Once again Lewis had proven himself a fiery non-conformist, this time in a letter rather than in a novel.

The clash between Sinclair Lewis and the august Pulitzer Prize board was reverberative in the press. H. L. Mencken in the Baltimore Sun called the refusal ". . . a gallant and excellent gesture."[4] The Philadelphia Record was as scornful in criticizing Lewis as he had been in renouncing the prize: "It was not enough that he should reject the proffered accolade; he must spurn it with contumelious scorn and denounce it as an agency of prostitution. . . ."[5] Chidingly, the Minneapolis Tribune said,

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[3]Harry Maule and Melville Cone, editors, The Man From Main Street, A Sinclair Lewis Reader (New York: Random House, 1953), pp. 19-20.

[4]Anonymous, "Sinclair Lewis's Hornets' Nest," The Literary Digest, 89:27, May 29, 1926.

[5]Ibid., p. 28.

"Essentially a somewhat futile institution, the Pulitzer Prize award is dignified too much when Mr. Lewis proceeds to wax so spectacular and melodramatic about it."[6]

If the critical reaction proved nothing more than a "tempest in a pot of tea", the resultant publicity was another thing. The sales department of Harcourt, Brace must have smiled happily in preparation for another printing "Announced by all the trumpets in the sky" and considerable free coverage.

Shortly after Babbitt's success, Lewis had contemplated a "labor" novel. Certainly it was a "natural" for Lewis's talents, but it was shunted aside (never to bear fruition) after a chance meeting with Morris Fishbein. The latter, managing editor of The Journal of the American Medical Association, and a writer of merit himself, abhorred quackery and detested charlatans. He never ceased in his efforts to expose them. At this time and for many years to follow, Fishbein, though the appellation might not be as distinctive as his role, was "Mr. Medicine" in America. Lewis's feelings for medical science were fortified after talking to this great doctor, and a novel of the healing art took precedence over all other writing plans.

If the keel was laid with Fishbein, the launching was

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[6]Maule and Cane, op. cit., p. 18.

accomplished with Paul De Kruif. An equally casual meeting with the latter brought swift results.

> Within twenty-four hours after he had met De Kruif, Lewis had sketched out roughly the outline of his novel. One part was to deal with the conquest of the plague on a tropical island. A trip to the West Indies would furnish a good means of beginning his researches, and Lewis though that Paul De Kruif, who had recently left the Rockefeller Institute, was the one man to help him. . . .[7]

De Kruif was an inspiration as well as a scientific advisor for Lewis. He was the individualist whom Lewis was to identify not only with Arrowsmith, but with his fellow scientist Terry Wickett, as well, in their search for truth. Arrowsmith and Wickett exemplified, in fiction, a passionate honesty for research which De Kruif had already practiced in fact.

Only recently he had been asked to leave the Rockefeller Institute because of a book he had written called Our Medicine Men which criticized careless techniques he had observed at the famous New York institution. He said, "I made mock of the lack of experimental rigor of certain Rockefeller doctors who were testing serum for Type I pneumonia."[8]

The collaboration of these two, Lewis and De Kruif,

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[7]Harrison Smith, op. cit., p. 121.

[8]Grace Hegger Lewis, With Love From Gracie (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1951), p. 230.

assured a work of fiction with, however, a factual and significant theme, the like of which was unprecedented in American literature. Later, Lewis specifically acknowledged his indebtedness to Dr. De Kruif for the bacteriological and medical lore in the preface to Arrowsmith, but he avoided sharing full collaboration honors with his mentor.

> After the novel came out there may have been some among the scientific men who thought De Kruif rather than Lewis wrote Arrowsmith. 'This is nonsense,' says Paul. 'I helped substantially both with the science and the human story, but I could never have written it because a novelist is precisely what I am not and could never be. He was a brilliantly imaginative man who dared to let his imagination go on paper. He taught me to do it. Without my apprenticeship with Red, I could never have written Microbe Hunters. He released my ability to write. I will go farther: I could never have become a good writer without him. But after the promising and praising and evasions relative to the credit, something died in me toward him. The juice had gone out of our friendship'[9]

Strangely enough, the tentative title Lewis planned for his book was Barbarian. Other titles contemplated were Courage, The Savage, The Merry Death and even Strange Islands. Wisely, Alfred Harcourt suggested the title Arrowsmith, and his good judgment prevailed.

Although there is much in Martin Arrowsmith that is autobiographical, De Kruif tells, interestingly, how Lewis recognized the physical characteristics of Arrowsmith in an unknown passenger. Intrigued by a grave, intent, black-haired

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[9]Ibid., p. 284.

young man, who stared at him across his rum swizzle in a ship's smoking room, Lewis immediately identified the stranger as his own creation, Doctor Martin Arrowsmith.[10]

> The driver of the wagon swaying through forest and swamp of the Ohio wilderness was a ragged girl of fourteen. Her mother they had buried near the Monongahela - the girl herself had heaped with torn sods the grave. . . . Her father lay shrinking with fever on the floor of the wagon . . . about him played her brothers and sisters . . . the sick quavered, 'Ommy, ye better turn down towards Cincinnati. If we find Uncle Ed, I guess he'd take us in.' 'Nobody ain't going to take us in,' she said. 'We're going to jus' go along as we can. Going West? They's a whole lot of new things I aim to be seeing.'[11].

This pioneer spirit of independence and exploration must have been willed genetically to her great grandson because Martin Arrowsmith showed early the same impertinent inquiry. In his case it was medicine and science.

> By sheer brass and obstinacy he had, at fourteen, become the unofficial, also decidedly unpaid, assistant to the Doc and while the Doc was on a country call he took charge -- though what there was to take charge of, no one could ever make out.[12]

But as with other Lewis characters, this slim, dark and intense young man was to conflict continually with the materialism of his milieu -- in college, as a country practitioner, as a public health administrator, in the elegance

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[10] Ibid., p. 262.

[11] Sinclair Lewis, Arrowsmith (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1925), p. 1.

[12] Ibid., p. 2.

of the modern research laboratory, and finally with himself as a scientist.

In medical school, Martin's restless curiosity and common sense caused his pharmacy professor to lose patience when questioned about the advisability of remembering prescriptions that could be looked up in a book. "Arrowsmith, . . . you will learn the properties of drugs and the contents of prescriptions <u>because I tell you to</u>. . . ."[13] It was a fault and at the same time a virtue in the young man's make-up, this inability to accept, this propensity to question.

Through a series of circumstances, partly his fault and partly beyond his control, Arrowsmith found himself practicing medicine in his wife's home town, Wheatsylvania in the Dakotas, but the village virus was as endemic there as in Gopher Prairie. Far from his beloved idol, Dr. Gottlieb, and the laboratory that he loved as well, Martin attempted to conform to his fate. His beloved bride Leora was the only reason for making the whole thing endurable, but it was her family which made life abominable for Martin.

Sinclair Lewis's failure to represent "in-laws" except as meddling, unbelievable, and thoroughly obnoxious people is one of his failings in otherwise magnificent character portrayal. In <u>Main Street</u> Carol had to endure the cackling, snooping aunt and uncle of Will Kennicott. Martin,

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[13] <u>Ibid</u>., p. 41.

however, had more formidable opposition in the Tozer family. When the question of Martin's office came up, his mother-in-law's ensuing dialogue is almost unbelievable:

> Oh, I have such a nice idea, Martin. Why can't we fix up an office for you out in the barn? It's so handy to the house, for you to get to meals on time, and you could keep an eye on the house if the girl was out and Orry and I went out visiting or to the Embroidery Circle.[14]

And Leora's brother Bert replies to Martin's indignation with a sneer:

> Yuh, but you aren't much of a physician yet, you're just getting your toes in . . . as we're putting up the money --- I don't want to be a tightwad but after all, a dollar is a dollar --- if we furnish the dough, we've got to decide the best way to spend it.[15]

Father Tozer, town banker and careful mortgagor, in all his seriousness provides a comic rather than tragic tone in his assertion:

> . . . stands to reason you can look at a fellow's sore throat or prescribe for an ear-ache just as well in a nice simple little office as in some fool place all fixed up like a Moorehead saloon. Mother will see you have a comfortable corner in the barn.[16]

Fortunately for Martin he had Leora to intervene in his behalf. But she couldn't fight all her husband's conflicts with Wheatsylvania and its citizens. He affronted the

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[14]Sinclair Lewis, op. cit., p. 145.

[15]Loc. cit.

[16]Loc. cit.

Norbloms when he got a better "deal" for his office, he challenged the reliability of the laughing druggist, and like Carol Kennicott, he invited gossip when he chose the "wrong" people with whom he could feel at ease.

But it was not the village virus, attenuating and deteriorating with which Carol Kennicott had struggled to survive, but a more recognizable disease that plagued Martin. A typhoid threat which Martin warned the people of by isolating a "Typhoid Mary," brought a response of ridicule and scorn.

> By autumn it had become such a burlesque epic as peasants love through all the world. He had, they mirthfully related, declared that anybody who kept hogs would die of small pox; he had been drunk for a week, and diagnosed everything from gall stones to heartburn as small pox. They greeted him with no meaning of offense in their snickering, 'Got a pimple on my chin, Doc. What is 't -- small pox?'[17]

A letter of inquiry and excellent recommendations, especially from Dr. Gottlieb, his old lab professor, provided Arrowsmith with a passport from Wheatsylvania to an appointment as assistant director of Public Health in the city of Nautilus, Iowa. Here, in a larger town, Martin comes a little closer to his main love, laboratory research, but as in Wheatsylvania his main conflict is with the ignorance, bigotry, and resistance to public health. And in between there and subconflicts with his boss, Dr. Pickerbaugh, and

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[17]Sinclair Lewis, op. cit., p. 189.

the blandishments of his daughter, Orchard.

For some readers, the most memorable character in the novel Arrowsmith is the understanding wife Leora. The critic, R. D. Townsend, noted that for the first time in his novels Lewis had presented a woman who was thoroughly liked. Townsend describes her:

> She is spunky, faithful, authentically feminine and human. She tells Martin before she marries him, 'I guess you're pretty selfish but I don't care. You're mine.' She stands up to him when he is raving mad, she comforts him when he is despairing; she forgives him and Heaven knows he needs forgiveness; she pokes fun at him; she follows him around like a little dog, as she says herself. She was probably the only woman in the world who could have put up with him, and it was because she knew all his defects and still loved him. Long after some of us have forgotten the medical side of this book we shall recall Leora with sympathy and understanding.[18]

The youthful allure and persistence of the opulent Orchard was temptation of a kind Martin had never experienced before. He knew it and so did the understanding Leora, but when his wife returned from a trip out of town, Dr. Arrowsmith could say almost clinically:

> It's all right . . . I feel a hundred and seven years old. I'm a respectable, moral young man, and Lord knows how I hate it, if it wasn't for my precipitation test and you and -- Why do you always lose your trunk check? I suppose I am a bad example for others, giving up so easily. No, no, darling, can't you see, that's

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R. D. Townsend, "Babbitting the Doctors," Outlook, 139:457, March 25, 1925.

the transportation check the conductor gave you![19]

This attentiveness and understanding, mutual love and respect which Leora and Martin shared with one another make their relationship one of the most gratifying and moving in Lewis's novels. It is really difficult for the reader to accept Bernard De Voto's dismissal of Leora as emotionally underdeveloped.[20] Yet Grace Hegger Lewis had this to say:

> . . . Leora is still appealing but even she, the most admired of all his woman characters, is not three dimensional -- he /Lewis/ had pinned on her the placard 'undemanding wife every man dreams of' . . . and even Leora he had found inadequate when he turned to Joyce Lanyon, who is quite improbable. . . .[21]

Dr. Pickerbaugh is a medical Babbitt with a knack for advertising and public relations who never stops to look inwardly, as his counterpart did. A booster of public health with catchy phrases such as the "Health Bee," and "Better Babies Week," Pickerbaugh had one eye on the local scene, the other on Congress.

> When Martin suggested that all milk should be pasteurized, that certain tenements known to be tuberculosis breeders should be burnt down . . . when he hinted that these attacks would save more lives than ten thousand sermons . . . Pickerbaugh worried. 'No, no, Martin, don't think we could do that. Get so much opposition from the dairymen

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[19]Sinclair Lewis, op. cit., p. 235.

[20]Bernard De Voto, The Literary Fallacy (Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1944), p. 100.

[21]Grace Hegger Lewis, op. cit., p. 257.

> and the landlords. Can't accomplish anything in this work unless you keep from offending people' . . . when Pickerbaugh addressed a church or the home circle he spoke of the 'value of health in making life more joyful,' but when he addressed a business luncheon he changed it to 'the value in good round dollars and cents of having workmen who are healthy and sober, and therefore, able to work faster at the same wages.' Parents' associations he enlightened upon 'the savings in doctors' bills . . . but to physicians he gave assurance that public health agitation would merely make the custom of going to doctors more popular.[22]

It was difficult for Martin to fight the buffoonery and hypocrisy of the benevolent Pickerbaugh, who frequently signed letters "Pick" in red pencil. Although restrained by his superior, Martin did create animosity by daring to close infectious dairies. But his association with an elite social group headed by Clay Tredgold provided interference for many of his irritating reforms. An unfortunate and caustic remark by Arrowsmith to Tredgold when he tried to woo the doctor away from his work one evening broke this social tie.

Thus Martin found himself unguarded and unprotected when Pickerbaugh recommended him as his successor. Once again he had failed to heed the call for compliance though Pickerbaugh advised, "Your work is very satisfactory. There is only one thing you lack, my boy, enthusiasm for getting together with folks and giving a long pull and a strong pull, all together. . . ."[23]

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[22]Sinclair Lewis, op. cit., p. 227.

[23]Ibid., p. 247.

Within a short time Dr. Arrowsmith enjoyed the possession of a large power which Dr. Pickerbaugh had been too timid to employ. The demolition of a disease-ridden slum section owned by a person with political influence finally destroyed Martin's tenure in the Health Department. Realizing his plight, he agonized:

> It's my own fault I can't go out and soft soap the people and get their permission to help keep them well, and won't tell them what . . . an important thing my work is -- that I'm the one thing that saves the whole lot of 'em from dying immediately.[24]

The ousting of Dr. Arrowsmith was only a matter of time and expediency; Martin needed no plainer warning.

The curious paradox of Martin's continual refusal to conform, however, was that it brought him ever closer to his cherished objective, laboratory research. Remembering his orthodox colleague in medical school, Angus Duer, Martin wrote to him asking for a position in his clinic; and he was accepted.

> He admired Angus's firmness of purpose and stability of habit. Angus had a swim or a fencing lesson daily; he swam easily and fenced like a still faced demon. He was in bed before eleven-thirty . . . he never read anything or said anything which would not contribute to his progress as a brilliant young surgeon. . . .[25]

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[24] Ibid., p. 264.

[25] Ibid., p. 270.

But Arrowsmith learned that the Rouncefield Clinic was founded on the belief that any portions of the body without which people could conceivably get along should certainly be removed at once. Furthermore, Martin realized that though he was residing in the big city of Chicago, he simply was not living.

> With the quick hands, and one tenth of his brain, he made blood counts, did urinalyses and Wassermans and infrequent necropsies, and all the while he was dead in a white coffin. Amid the blottings of Pickerbough and the peepings of Wheatsylvania, he had lived, had fought his environment. Now was there nothing to fight?[26]

A published paper of Martin's in the Journal of Infectious Diseases brought an invitation from his former professor, Max Gottlieb, to join him at the famous McGurk Institute of Biology in New York. Martin had walked all the way around the barn to enter the front door. Here he could work in altruistic research unfettered by distracting forces -- he thought. Here he thrilled to Gottlieb's creed of the scientist.

> To be a scientist -- it is not just a different job, so that a man may choose between being a scientist and being an explorer or a bond-salesman or a physician or a king or a farmer. It is a tangle of every obscure emotions, like mysticism, or wanting to write poetry; it makes its victim all different from the good normal man . . . the scientist is so religious . . . that he will not accept quarter truths, because they are an insult to his faith . . . he speaks no meaner

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[26] Ibid., p. 271.

> of the ridiculous faith healers and the chiropractors than he does of the doctors that want to snatch our science before it is tested and rush around hoping that they heal people . . . the authentic scientist must be heartless. He lives in a cold clear light . . . really in private, he is not cold nor heartless. . . . But . . . not all the men who work at science are scientists. So few! The rest -- secretaries, press agents, camp-followers! To be a scientist is like being a Goethe: it is born in you . . .[27]

Typically, Gottlieb capped his welcome to Martin with a sincere and scientific benediction, "May Koch bless you!"[28]

Martin's work at the Institute was stimulating and uninhibited until World War I forced him "to eye a khaki suit with loathing," and manufacture lipo-vaccine at the laboratory as his part in the war effort. Quite by chance Martin discovered an X principle from the pus of a carbuncle which annihilated bacteria with devastating speed. Fame and success seemed to be thrust upon him. All he needed to do was publish his findings. The pressure of the Institute director was on him, but he was too much the disciple of Gottlieb to publish prematurely. The result of his reluctance to be hurried was the bitter news that another discoverer of phage of the X principle preceded Martin's publication. The Institute director wailed: "If you had

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[27]Ibid., pp. 280-1.

[28]Loc. cit.

[29]Ibid., p. 327.

published as I told you, Dr. Arrowsmith. . . .!"[29] Dr. Gottlieb, consoling, but advisory, said,

> Now, of course, you could claim to be codiscoverer and spend the rest of your life fighting to get recognized. Or you could forget it and write a nice letter congratulating D' Herelle, and go back to work.[30]

The opportunity to test his phage on bubonic plague in the West Indies under rigid scientific controls, however, gave Martin some compensating satisfaction. But the tragic death of Leora so unnerved him that he forgot his scientific role, which conflicted with his feelings of compassion and sorrow. He gave the phage to all who asked for it and thereby destroyed his controlled experimentation.

Arrowsmith's subsequent return to the Institute and his marriage to Joyce Lanyon provided an interlude in his life which was significant for its conventionality. But this concession was bound to be short-lived. Arrowsmith's flight to Terry Wickett's independent Vermont Laboratory severed his ties to Joyce and the McGurk Institute.

> 'I feel as if I were really beginning to work now,' said Martin. 'This new quinine stuff may prove pretty good. We'll plug along on it for two or three years and maybe we'll get something permanent -- and probably we'll fail.'[31]

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[30] Loc. cit.

[31] Ibid., p. 448.

If the layman found Arrowsmith believable, some doctors did not! The review of the book, shortly after publication, by one doctor disapproved of what he considered impious treatment of the profession.

> . . . certainly, this story was not written for the entertainment or inspiration of doctors, nor to carry a lesson or promote a cause. . . . From an author of such ability we could wish a more typical doctor for his hero.[32]

The critic now becomes Maudlin in his pathos,

> . . . What would Arrowsmith have done if his own dull neglect of his precious trusting Dakota bride had not denied her the career of mother . . . Where would his poker and intermittent drunks have led him if he had been given a mere man's usual hostages and been bound to labor by the burden of a family . . .?[33]

Lewis's perennial critic, Bernard De Voto, was unusually scathing.

> . . . Mr. Lewis does indeed picture certain genuine absurdities of science in the book, but never really dangerous absurdities. And the austerity, complexity, illuminations, frustrations, methods, goals, and conditions of scientific thinking never get into the book at all. The realities of science, worthy or unworthy, the great world of science in its entirety, are altogether passed by. . . .[34]

One would be led to believe that in his rage Mr. De Voto had forgotten what he had denounced about Lewis

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[32]Anonymous, "A Doctor Looks at Arrowsmith," Survey, 54:181, May 1, 1925.

[33]Ibid.

[34]Loc. cit.

and Arrowsmith in the opening paragraphs of the same article:

> . . . We may dismiss the survey as within the prerogatives of satire, though Mr. Lewis's virtuosity blinds one to the ferocious injustice done to the Public Health Service, institutions like the Rockefeller Foundation, medical research in general, and the customary life of doctors.[35]

In one breath Mr. De Voto accuses Lewis of derogating the whole gamut of medicine and in the next breath he chastises him for not picturing the really dangerous absurdities of science. Certainly the laxity of the citizenry in backing the Public Health Service, the political chicanery involved in that bureau, the readiness to blame Dr. Arrowsmith for a child's death after he had been called too late, and the scientific approach of Dr. Gottlieb are but a few of the examples in which Lewis directly defended the doctrine of medicine against the hypocrisy of its critics.

Grace Hegger Lewis tells of Paul De Kruif's subsequent re-examination of Arrowsmith:

> Paul says in re-reading the book recently he realizes how much medicine has changed -- indeed revolutionized -- but Arrowsmith has one timeless part -- the famous section of controls or no controls in the plague prevention work in the West Indies epidemic.[36]

Another remarkable feature of the book is Arrowsmith's work on the X principle or phage as it was identified. Although the book was written in 1925, it wasn't

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[35]De Voto, op. cit., p. 95.

[36]Grace Hegger Lewis, op. cit., p. 257.

until the 1940's that penicillin was adopted for widespread treatment of infection, yet the similarity between the effectiveness of phage and penicillin is amazing.

Criticism of the book because it shows the sordid side of medicine is an injustice to the profession itself. Lewis's main endeavor was to portray the role of the true scientist. If he exposed the frailties, the quacks, the charlatans, and the commercialists who infiltrated an honored calling, he was more constructive than if he depicted a flattering, one-sided picture which would be nothing more than a "catered affair."

Like Janus, Lewis faced in two directions, and he reported accurately what he saw on both sides. In his portrayal of Martin Arrowsmith, Lewis revealed the conflict which even a young scientist has to face in an age of conformity: if he is to be accepted, whether in a small town or a large research center, he must often lie, cheat, commercialize, follow the leader obsequiously, and stifle his scientific impulses. The continual battle Martin had to wage with this type of insincerity is finally resolved when he and a fellow-scientist retreat to their own little scientific world in Vermont. There they work away on impossible problems, which they more often fail than succeed in, but at last they find scientific peace, maturity, and independence.

CONTEMPORARIES

With the publication of Main Street, Sinclair Lewis became not only rich and famous, but as Mark Schorer points out, "he also became through this single book the spokesman for a literary generation."[1] It almost seemed as though Lewis had been waiting in the wings to assume the role. William Dean Howells died in the spring of 1920, and in the fall of the same year Main Street was published. A hitherto lightly regarded novelist of five minor works suddenly became the lion of the American literary world.

Mr. Schorer noted further:

> The book /Main Street/ seemed above all, to be American; and that, at a time when most American fiction was imitative of the already faint provincial fiction of Great Britain, was another element in its great success. Many of its readers had never been exposed to a novel that was so uncompromisingly American both in its seeming truthfulness to the native scene and in the language that communicated it.[2]

There had never been anything quite like it Mr. Schorer explains:

> Lewis was inundated with letters of praise from his fellows . . . American congratulations came from every quarter: Rupert Hughes, Zona Gale, Hendrick Van Loon, Fannie Hurst, Hamlin

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[1]Mark Schorer, "Main Street," American Heritage, 12:28, October, 1961.

[2]Loc. cit.

> Garland, Vachel Lindsay -- these were a few of them.[3]

Several months before the publication of Main Street, Sinclair Lewis had written a letter to Floyd Dell in praise of the latter's novel, Moon Calf. The book was enjoying some success as an exposé of the conventions of the Middle West. In his congratulatory letter, Lewis hailed Dell and Zona Gale as blazing twin stars in alliterary firmament. Lewis concluded by modestly representing himself as a lesser light who twinkled humbly in their glow.[4]

Later, Schorer tells us, Lewis was to write to Dell with the words ". . . there's some good writers in these . . . states now: you and I, perhaps; Hergesheimer, Gale, Anderson, Dreiser, Cather, Charley Morris and Wharton. . . ."[5]

Floyd Dell frankly admitted, however, that Lewis was the pacesetter when he said:

> Sinclair Lewis's Main Street and Zona Gale's Miss Lulu Bett were the best sellers that year, marking a revulsion of feeling against the mob-hysterics of the war period; and my novel, which was usually referred to in all the reviews along with it to a considerable sale . . . my book achieved that success by the accident of its coming at the time it did; if I had finished it

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[3]Ibid., p. 29.

[4]Mark Schorer, Sinclair Lewis: An American Life (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1961), p. 276.

[5]Ibid., p. 277.

> in any year earlier than 1920, it would have been as much neglected, I believe, as Sherwood Anderson's first novel was. It profited by a sudden and rather hysterical fury of popular resentment against business, regimentation, and conventional life.[6]

Another contemporary whom Lewis had admired for some time was James Branch Cabell. Mark Schorer reveals that in 1919 the Lewises "spent three days with James Branch Cabell, whom Lewis had known through correspondence . . . and for whom he had an inordinate admiration."[7] It was during this visit that Cabell reviewed parts of the unpublished Main Street and made certain suggestions regarding deletions. In gratitude Lewis dedicated Main Street to James Branch Cabell. Joseph Hergesheimer, who was, at the time, another one of Lewis's literary idols, also shared in the dedication. Mark Schorer raises the question posed by Sydnor Harrison, the author of Queed who asked, shortly after Main Street's publication, "'Why did he dedicate it,' he exclaimed to Alfred Harcourt, 'to two men neither of whom is really in his class!'"[8] There is evidence, nevertheless, to support the assumption that Lewis was influenced to some degree by Cabell and indebted to him for the iconoclasm which Lewis

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[6]Ibid., pp. 276-7.

[7]Ibid., p. 258.

[8]Ibid., p. 282.

was to use so devastatingly.

Mark Schorer makes this interesting comparison between the two:

> Both were supported by H. L. Mencken, for his own variety of reasons and along with such still different writers as Theodore Dreiser and Willa Cather, Lewis and Cabell have an interesting literary linkage. As Frederick J. Hoffman has pointed out, both were fantasy writers, the difference being that Lewis created his fantasy out of real social fragments, whereas Cabell's was created out of completely unreal materials. Lewis, perhaps, giving all the illusion of completeness, did not tell us enough; but Cabell told us nothing, with ridiculous if persuasive intentions. . . .[9]

Cabell, curiously, went one step further than his contemporary realists, who could offer no solution for the convention-trapped mortal since he saw no freedom for him even in fantasy. He was, in effect, a romantic in his subject matter, but ironical in his conclusions.

There is much to compare, however, between Cabell and Lewis. Both ridiculed and satirized in much the same tone the realities of superficial modern life. They ridiculed all manner of experience, democracy, religion, justice, love, women, chivalry, morality, pride, Puritanism, marriage, literature, politics and vanity.

Jurgen is one of Cabell's most popular and representative works. It is the story of Jurgen, who at forty is allowed, as Carol Van Doren points out, "to have a year

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[9]Ibid., p. 283.

of youth and to move about the world with his old head on his young shoulders, an impish, inquiring Faust."[10] During this year Jurgen assumes many different roles and privileges as duke, prince, king, emperor, and pope.

He visits many mythical lands in his search for truth, or as Cabell terms it, "poetic justice." Jurgen languishes for a while with the beautiful Chloris in the city of Pseudopolis until it is besieged by the enemy, the Philistines. These people fight with a terrible fire-weapon which consumes everything that is not gray colored, for that is their favorite color. Cabell sardonically describes the fall of Pseudopolis:

> They /the Philistines/ defiled this city of blasphemous colors, then burned it as a sacrifice to their god, Vel-Tyno, because the color of ashes is gray . . . 'Let them fight it out,' said Jurgen: 'it is not my affair . . . dullness will conquer dullness, and it will not matter.'"[11]

In the ancient land of Poictesme, Jurgen passes into the underworld and meets Koschei, the symbol of things as they actually are. Koschei offers varied treasures which Jurgen once cherished. He may have as his wife any woman who ever lived. He surveys one by one the world's most famous beauties, and in the end, after learning all they have to teach him, returns to his own unlovely wife.

Carol Van Doren summarizes Jurgen's final feelings

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[10]Carl Van Doren, The American Novel (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), p. 318.

[11]James Branch Cabell, Jurgen (New York: Robert M. Mc Bride Company, 1919), p. 232.

in this fashion:

> At the end of this story, Jurgen no longer desires to live further in the romantic world of his youth. Now less chivalrous than he was, less sensual, and less insistent on perfection, he cannot live on the higher plane of fantasies in which he does not believe. Experience nowhere supports the doctrine of 'poetic justice' . . . Jurgen suspects he is a failure for not being able to keep his faith, but he cannot.[12]

And so Jurgen goes back to the conformity and reality of the routine life of a pawnbroker. He returns to the duller, more secure existence with his wife, disillusioned, but with some feeling of contentment.

Babbitt experiences the same sort of disenchantment in his more work-a-day world. Whereas Jurgen had his Dorothy la Desirée, Babbitt romped uninhibited in his dream world with the "child fairy" until the alarm clock awakened him to the world of reality at seven-thirty in the morning. It was then that Lewis describes Babbitt thus:

> . . . he who had been a boy very credulous of life was no longer greatly interested in the possible and improbable adventures of each new day.[13]

When Babbitt is given the opportunity to philander, however, his city of Zenith becomes a Poictesme. His brief but impassioned affair with Tanis Judique and her Bohemian friends convinces Babbitt finally that to escape into a world of revelry and promiscuity is to escape into nothing. Furthermore, Babbitt's brief alignment with the liberals in defiance

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[12]Van Doren, op. cit., p. 319.

[13]Sinclair Lewis, Babbitt (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1922), p. 3.

of the Zenith Philistines, the Good Citizens' League, is short lived because Babbitt suspects, like Jurgen, that he is a failure. He does not have the resources to think originally nor comprehend what his true self is. His natural instinct is to follow the crowd and its conventions.

Carol Kennicott's final submission to Gopher Prairie is akin to the capitulation of Jurgen and Babbitt. Arrowsmith is the exception as he breaks with convention in his quest for scientific truth. Carol, however, finds her wartime Washington fling an inane and disillusioning experience. Her affair with Valborg, while tender, is illogical and unrealistic. She, like Jurgen and Babbitt, returns to the comfortable conformity of her former life which includes her forgiving and understanding spouse.

The theme, then, which Cabell and Lewis employed so similarly, is the conflict of the character with the conformity of his environment, his attempts to rise above the banality of his surroundings, his surrender and his final yielding to the conventions of his society.

The difference between the fading appeal of James Branch Cabell and the enduring popularity of Sinclair Lewis, however, may lie in these comparisons: Cabell refuses to recognize any worth in his protagonists' efforts. All their endeavors end in sophisticated negation and futility, a theme dear to the hearts of the "beautiful and the damned" post World War I literary sophisticates.

Carl Van Doren reminds us that Babbitt, however, "has learned enough to encourage his son in marrying for love and doing the work he likes best. Babbitt's fling has not been pure folly but a kind of abortive triumph."[14] One cannot help admiring Carol Kennicott -- down but not out -- muttering determinedly, "'I may not have fought the good fight, but I have kept the faith.'"[15]

Despite his satire and irony, Lewis does have a certain compassion, and even a liking, for his characters in their unsuccessful conflict with convention. If he failed to offer a solution to Carol's problem, the cause may be attributable to the Cabell influence, especially since Floyd Dell reports in Homecoming:

> . . . Lewis was said to have cut out from his Main Street, on the advice of Cabell, the one sensible character in the book, through whom his own constructive views were to have been expressed.[16]

In December of 1920, Sherwood Anderson wrote to Sinclair Lewis telling him how glad he was that Lewis had written Main Street. In reply Lewis wrote to Anderson telling him that he was an ardent booster of Winesburg.

This mutual admiration was to suffer later, but at

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[14]Van Doren, op. cit., p. 307.

[15]Sinclair Lewis, Main Street (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1921), p. 451.

[16]Floyd Dell, Homecoming, quoted by Mark Schorer in "Main Street," American Heritage, 12:76, October, 1961.

this time, as Mark Schorer records, Lewis wrote to Anderson with this congenial hope:

> Some day . . . I wish Floyd Dell, Joe Hergesheimer, James Cabell . . . you and I could get together -- in a savage place without constabules [sic] -- have a week together, and fight and roar. Either we'd all be dead at the end or have started something -- or, conceivably, all quit writing novels . . .![17]

Schorer goes on to make a comparison between Lewis and Anderson in that "both were concerned with essentially the same subject, the frustrations of hinterland America. . . ."[18]

Heading Anderson's life and his literature, it is easy to see that much of his writing, like Lewis's, was autobiographical, and that the conventions of the small town played an important role in his worls. Winesburg and Gopher Prairie typify the shallow environments that repress the ambitions of men and women and finally overwhelm them. But like Lewis, Anderson was also critical of the materialism and hypocrisies of the society he saw about him in American cities as well as in the provinces.

The popular story of Anderson's dramatic entry into literature is that he suddenly walked out of his prosperous paint factory one day and never returned. He was simply worn out with the cheap, shabby tricks and pretensions of the industrial world.

Carl Van Doren recalls that Anderson:

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[17]Schorer, op. cit., p. 278.

[18]Ibid., p. 280.

> . . . gave up business, went to Chicago, and wrote stories and novels about heroes like himself, with thoughts like his. The nation, he thought, had reached its goal of material prosperity, but did not look ahead to intellectual and spiritual completions. It had grown fat with overfeeding . . . It was dead-alive. Men ought to be full of vitality, full of beauty and heroism. Anderson went beyond the revolt from the village to an imaginative criticism of the whole American world.[19]

The theme was strikingly similar to Lewis's lament, "dullness made God," and the declaration by Lewis that Main Street was not restricted to Gopher Prairie, but could be any street in any town in America.

Most of Anderson's characters are lonely people, sensitive people, who are often misunderstood and unfortunate victims of their environment: George Willard, the young Winesburg reporter; Kate Swift, the teacher whom everyone thought a confirmed old maid, but who, in reality, was the most passionate soul among them, and Alice Hindman, the clerk who ran naked in the rain -- all have their counterparts in Lewis's Main Street characters. There is Guy Pollack, the faded lawyer who analyzes the town accurately, but is powerless to stand up to it; Vida Sherwin, the brittle, lonely, and neglected school teacher who weeps bitter tears in her bedroom; and Carol Kennicott ran and whooped impulsively down Main Street -- to the town's disapproval!

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[19]Van Doren, op. cit., pp. 298-9.

It is in George Willard, the sensitive young reporter, that we recognize Sherwood Anderson telling of the twisted and tortured hearts of people in Winesburg, confused and disconcerted by a dull and gray environment. Hallford Luccock reminds us that:

> In his /Anderson's/ particular flair for the portrayal of baffled and frustrated lives, he has recorded again and again his sense of the crushing of something beautiful by a mechanized, standardized, greed-driven order of life. A characteristic sentence is, 'The living force within could not find expression.' His pages are filled with people who 'die with all their music in them.'[20]

Later, when Sherwood Anderson became sharply critical of Sinclair Lewis, he had this to say:

> The texture of prose written by Mr. Lewis gives me but faint joy, and I cannot escape the conviction that for some reason Lewis has himself found but little joy, either in life among us or in his own effort to channel his reactions to our life into prose.[21]

But one of the most memorable characters in Babbitt, Paul Reisling, is drawn with sympathy and understanding by Lewis equal to any one of Anderson's tender tragedies. Paul Reisling, who ought to have been a concert violinst, but who earned a good living as a peddler of tar roofing, is movingly presented by Lewis in the famous Pullman car episode. Lewis

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[20]Halford E. Luccock, Contemporary American Literature and Religion (New York: Willett Clark and Company, 1934), p. 69.

[21]Schorer, op. cit., p. 280.

describes the reaction of a group of traveling salesmen to Paul's poetic observation of a steel mill:

> Then he /Paul/ committed an offense against the holy law of the clan of Good Fellows. He became a highbrow. They were entering a city. On the outskirts they passed a steel mill which flared in scarlet and orange flame that licked at the cadaverous stacks, at the iron sheathed walls and sullen converters. 'My Lord, look at that -- beautiful!' said Paul, 'You bet it's beautiful friend. That's the Shelling-Horton Steel Plant, and they tell me old John Shelling made a good three million bones out of munitions during the war!' the man with the velour hat said reverently. 'I didn't mean -- I mean it's lovely the way the light pulls that picturesque yard, all littered with junk, right out of the darkness,' said Paul. They stared at him. . . .[22]

The strange tragedy of Paul's case involving his incarceration for the shooting of his wife affected Babbitt deeply. In Paul, Babbitt sorrowfully saw the stifling of an aesthete whose ideals he had shared vicariously.

In his recent biography of Sinclair Lewis, Mark Schorer touched upon a point which many people have wondered about. The reference is the dedication of Babbitt to Edith Wharton by Sinclair Lewis, and Schorer tells us:

> . . . She was a writer of some, but not of great prestige that he would have much to gain by associating her name with a book of his. Was it, perhaps, a gesture of noblesse oblige, a real or feigned generosity that was to suggest that yes, indeed, it was she, not he, to whom the Pulitzer prize should have gone? Or

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[22]Sinclair Lewis, Babbitt (New York: Grossett and Dunlap Company, 1922), pp. 143-4.

was it the recognition of real indebtedness.[23]

Lewis had read Edith Wharton when he was in college, and Schorer tells us that "he had admired her, and he had tried to imitate her manner when he was a novice writing in California."[24]

Schorer goes on to say:

> One day Arthur Mizener would refer to Lewis as the 'Edith Wharton of the provincial American class,' not only because he described their manners as she did the manners of her class, but because, he, like Edith Wharton, was so profoundly of his class even when alienated from it. The New York society that Edith Wharton pictured was as flat and as futile as the society of Zenith, and the "Four Hundred" of that world was as indifferent to art and learning, if not as actively hostile, as the Boosters' Club.[25]

When Edith Wharton turned from the New York patrician set which she knew so well to look at life in the Middle West, her observations were similarly perceptive. Like Lewis, she deplored the barren wasteland of American materialism as not just local color but national in scope.

According to Van Wyck Brooks, Miss Wharton felt that the Middle West was uninspiring and deadening as her own New York social set:

> . . . the whole vast region was merely a world of banal church suppers, black-mailers,

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[23]Schorer, op. cit., p. 347.

[24]Loc. cit.

[25]Ibid., p. 347.

> realtors, drummers, and shady deals. It was a part of the dim, dingy waste in which, for Edith Wharton's mind, the humbler classes carried on their vague existence, -- -- the 'fat man with a creased stomach and soft pale lips' and the waitresses with their 'pert' faces and 'brazen eyes.'[26]

Two themes, then, which Lewis and Wharton shared and satirized were the foibles of class society with its cramping conventions, and social climbers or the nouveaux-riches.

In Babbitt these points of reference were treated ironically by Lewis, who explained:

> Fame did not bring the social advancement which the Babbitts felt they deserved. They were not asked to join the Tonawanda Country Club nor invited to dances at the Union. Himself, Babbitt fretted, he didn't 'care a fat hoot for all these highrollers, but the wife would kind of like to be Among Those Present.'[27]

At Babbitt's class reunion, he ingratiated himself with the successful millionaire, Charles McKelvey, by hinting of a profitable deal in real estate. Emboldened, the Babbitts invited the McKelveys to dinner and though the latter condescended, it was, on the whole, a strained affair. Lewis explains why in the conversation between Babbitt and the elegant Mrs. McKelvey:

> 'I suppose you'll be going to Europe pretty soon again won't you?' he invited. 'I'd like

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[26]Van Wyck Brooks, The Opinions of Oliver Alston, quoted by Mark Schorer in Sinclair Lewis: An American Life (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1961), p. 347.

[27]Sinclair Lewis, Lewis at Zenith (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World Inc., 1961), p. 456.

> awfully to run over to Rome for a few weeks.' 'I suppose you see a lot of pictures and music and curios and everything there.' 'No, what I really go for is: there's a little trattoria on the Via della Scroafa where you get the best fettuccine in the world.' 'Oh, I, I -- Yes. That must be nice to try that.' 'Yes.'[28]

The McKelveys never reciprocated the dinner party. Instead, the Babbitts reluctantly accepted an invitation from a shabby and unsuccessful classmate. Lewis reveals the irony of the situation when Babbitt complains, "Well, I guess we're stuck for it. That's the trouble with all this class-brother hooptodoodle."[29]

Although even the Zenith McKelveys would have been considered parvenus by the elegant Eastern society of which Edith Wharton indited, the authoress wrote of the same hypocrisies and artificial values within her caste which Lewis had castigated in his Middle-Western group.

In the opening pages of The Age of Innocence Mrs. Wharton introduces us to the smug New York society members whose positions had been achieved by the wealth of their aggressive and opportunistic progenitors.

In attendance at the opera was Newland Archer, prototype of his class, the young dilettante who leisurely

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[28]Sinclair Lewis, Babbitt (New York: Grossett and Dunlap, 1922), p. 196.

[29]Ibid., p. 200.

practiced law like so many other young men of his set. Miss Wharton describes the Academy of Music, where the Archers viewed the entertainment from a box seat, in this way:

> Conservatives cherished it for being small and inconvenient, and thus keeping out the 'new people' whom New York was beginning to dread and yet be drawn to; and the sentimental clung to it for its historic associations. . . .[30]

Though they are worlds apart in breeding and social order, Newland Archer and Babbitt are both "cabin'd, cribb'd, confined, and bound in to saucy doubts and fears" of their social circles. Archer, like Babbitt, makes a loveless conventional marriage and is in continual conflict with the conventions of his group, which he dares not offend. Although he makes a feeble protest against their proprieties, Archer is tormented at every turn by the prejudices of his social group. Even when he is free to marry Ellen, the divorcée whom he has loved the greater part of his life, the restrictions of his order are too binding and ingrained. Mrs. Wharton tells us:

> A few streets away, a few hours away, Ellen Olensha waited . . . there was nothing now to keep her and Archer apart -- and that afternoon he was to see her. . . .[31]

But in the end, Archer does not keep his reunion with Ellen because it is too comfortable to remain in the rut of his conventions. Edith Wharton analyzes Archer's feelings as he

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[30]Edith Wharton, The Age of Innocence (New York: Appleton and Company, 1920), p. 1.

[31]Ibid., p. 360.

delays in the park near Ellen's apartment:

> 'It's more real to me here than if I went up,' he suddenly heard himself say; and the fear lest that last shadow of reality should lose its edge kept him rooted to his seat as the minutes succeeded each other . . . he . . . got up slowly and walked back alone to his hotel.[32]

The fact that Sinclair Lewis dedicated two of his most successful novels to James Branch Cabell and Edith Wharton indicated what Lewis often intimated: that he owed these two writers, among others, a certain indebtedness for his success as America's supreme satirist of the nineteen-twenties.

In turn, John P. Marquand, one of the most successful satirists of the nineteen-thirties, mostly credited his fame to the Lewis influence. Mark Schorer, in his recent biography of Sinclair Lewis recalls:

> A few days after the publication of The God Seeker, an interview with John P. Marquand, published by Time magazine, pointed out certain similarities between Lewis and Marquand as satirists. Mark Schorer reports Marquand's reply as most gracious:
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> > 'I would hesitate to rank myself with Lewis. I don't think I have nearly the same stature. But I am working in the same vineyard. . . .'[33]

Early in 1943 Schorer tells us that Lewis offered this courtesy:

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[32] Ibid., pp. 364-5.

[33] Schorer, op. cit., p. 780.

> He told Marquand that he had re-read his three novels, The Late George Apley, Wickford Point, and H. M. Pulham Esq., and that he would very much like to write an introduction to a one volume edition of the three to be published as a trilogy under the title of North of Grand Central.[34]

Marquand, as a professional writer, had known and had been friends with Lewis even before the latter had achieved great success. Curiously, Marquand's success seemed to begin as Lewis's reputation diminished.

Both writers had similar early backgrounds as short story writers for slick magazines. For many years Mr. Marquand had been known for his series of clever mystery stories featuring the ingenious Japanese detective, Mr. Moto.

Suddenly, John P. Marquand wrote a novel about a class of people, his own kind, whom he knew well and satirized slyly, the "proper Bostonians." In this way he emulated the success of Lewis and Wharton; moreover, like Lewis in his introduction to Main Street, Marquand stressed the universality of this theme in the preface to The Late George Apley when he stated:

> The mental approach of The Late George Apley, which is in no sense confined to such a limited sphere as Boston, seems to me worthy of notice in a rapidly changing world. It is an attitude bred of security . . . it is a phenomenon observable in every civilization, and one which must exist whenever society assumes a stable pattern . . . Mr. Apley . . . seemed to approach the status of an apology for his class . . . as a human being he did the best he could; that he could not have done differently;

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[34] Ibid., p. 703.

that it was not his fault that he was an Apley.[35]

Although Sinclair Lewis, James Branch Cabell, Edith Wharton, and John P. Marquand sympathized with as well as satirized their protagonists, they offered little guidance or counsel for their dilemmas. They did hope, however, by exhibiting the pathetic products of cultural decadence, to awaken the American people to an awareness of their own insularity.

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[35]John P. Marquand, The Late George Apley (New York: Random House, 1936), Introduction -- no page reference given.

CONCLUSION

A man should be judged by his best works, but, unfortunately, during the years, Sinclair Lewis has been remembered all too frequently for his worst novels.

In 1920, when Lewis was thirty-five years old, he burst upon the American literary scene like a skyrocket, illuminating the foibles of American conventions in a shower of hot sparks. Through the decade he continued to criticize relentlessly the "contentment of the quiet dead."

The culmination for his efforts of this period was the awarding, in 1930, of the Nobel Literary Prize. Lewis was the first American writer to be so honored. It also marked the end of an era. Thereafter, Lewis's works diminished in perspective and brought his admirers only disappointment.

Even though his literary output was prodigious in the ensuing years, Lewis seemed to sense his own decline when he made these remarks at the Nobel Prize banquet:

> . . . Too much of its /American/ literature is still parochial and timid. Too many of its readers -- and writers -- are still afraid of any literature which is not a glorification . . . but there are still young men who without the support of public standards are doing such passionate and authentic work that it makes me sick to see that I am a little too

old to be one of them. . . .[1]

Lewis was only forty-five in 1930, and ordinarily an author is just reaching the height of his skill and power at this age. Sheldon Grebstein points out the probable cause for Lewis's descent when he says:

> . . . But with the coming of the depression, the stable middle-class world based on peace, prosperity, and business as usual, the world to which Lewis was inextricably attached, fell under assault by political, social, and economic forces which Lewis was either not fully equipped to comprehend or unable to depict convincingly . . . he tried in his own way to deal with the turmoil of the 1930's, but too often his methods made his work -- so fresh and original in the previous decade -- appear self-contradictory, tired, confused, contrived, and anachronistic.[2]

It is neither fair nor reasonable to forget a writer, who opened the door to a new kind of realism in America, because his latter books did not achieve the importance of his first three: Main Street, Babbitt, and Arrowsmith. The haunting images of these three books are a constant reminder of the smug complacency and conformity which America is in danger of falling prey to even now and as Lewis identified it over forty years ago. The perennial popularity of these iconoclastic

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[1]Carl Van Doren, The American Novel: 1789-1939 (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1940), p. 311.

[2]Sheldon Grebstein, Sinclair Lewis (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1962), p. 124.

novels of the twenties is still true today; despite the belittling of his detractors.

Sheldon Grebstein reminds us that "he /Lewis/ was the most powerful novelist of the decade when American fiction in general matured in scope and art."[3]

One thing is certain: in reply to Lewis's critics: few writers since Thomas Paine have had the ability to arouse a nation to improve its faults since Lewis's strident voice rang out almost a half century ago.

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[3] Ibid., p. 166.

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